

John Curtin and General Douglas MacArthur: a very special  
relationship

'Few figures who have spent less than three years in this country have had such an impact on Australia life'.<sup>1</sup>

With these words David Horner, one of Australia's most respected military historians, concluded his article in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* on General Douglas MacArthur whom he described as 'the dominant figure in Australia's conduct of World War II'.<sup>2</sup> His article was included in the fifteenth volume of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* published in 2000 and containing some 682 articles on prominent figures in Australian history who had died between 1940 and 1980. The vast majority of these articles concerned Australian born or those who had become Australian citizens but MacArthur was included as a 'prominent figure in Australian history'. Significantly, Horner had been the biographer for two of the senior Australians nearest to MacArthur during the Pacific War—Sir Frederick Shedden, the wartime Defence Secretary; and Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, who served under MacArthur's direct command as Commander in Chief of Australian Services during the war.

When exactly was MacArthur in Australia? From the Australian point of view the central premise of their defence strategy in 1941–1942 was reliance on the British navy with its base at Singapore and the point when the Japanese threat to Australia became most alarming was on 15 February 1942 (just over two months after Pearl Harbour) when Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, the British commander in Singapore ordered a ceasefire and surrendered to the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> (By contrast the Australian Commander of the 8th Division General Bennett and two of his officers escaped and returned to Australia in what can only be described as controversial circumstances).<sup>4</sup> Four days later occurred the bombing of Darwin and early in March the attack on Broome in the northwest of Western Australia. During this period initially there were only a relative handful of American servicemen stationed in Australia. Just over one month later at 9a.m. on 17 March MacArthur, on the last phase of his journey from Mindanao, landed at Batchelor Field Airport near Darwin (on the Australian north coast)-and where at the time a Japanese bombing raid was in progress and then travelled by bus (to Alice Springs) and rail to Melbourne arriving on 21 March to enthusiastic welcoming crowds. From there MacArthur arrived in Canberra five days later and in his capacity as Allied Supreme Commander in the South West Pacific met Australian prime minister John Curtin for the first time. Initially, MacArthur was to be stationed in Australia at Melbourne before moving his headquarters to Brisbane in July 1942 and then in September 1944 (two and half years after his first arrival in Darwin) to Hollandia on the north coast of Dutch New Guinea: Hollandia had been retaken from the Japanese only a few months earlier. Prior to his departure MacArthur met Curtin for the last time. At their first meeting on 26 March 1942, and in MacArthur's own words,

Curtin was determined that Australia should link its hopes and plans with the United States. Aware of the Commonwealth ties between his country and Great Britain, he nevertheless stood firm in his belief that the Pacific War was primary, and Australia's needs came first.<sup>5</sup>

It is important in appreciating the Curtin–MacArthur relationship to take account of the precarious nature of Curtin's parliamentary support in the early stages of his working relationship with MacArthur. Curtin himself had only become prime minister in October 1941 when two independents who had previously supported his opponents changes sides and voted down the non-Labor Government<sup>6</sup> and then for nearly two years he led a minority government dependent on the support of the two independents in the House of Representatives and of Opposition Senators in the Upper House. It was not until August 1943 when Curtin led his Labor Party to its greatest ever federal election victory that his party political situation in Parliament was assured. However, by November 1944 Curtin's health had deteriorated to the point where he had only occasional short spells in office before his death at the Prime Minister's Lodge in Canberra in early July 1945 at the age of 60. As was the case with his US counterpart Franklin Roosevelt, Curtin died within weeks of the ultimate victory.

The Curtin-MacArthur legend—1 use those words advisedly—is thus focussed on a two years and six months relationship encompassing a period of time, it is not an over-statement to suggest, universally regarded by historians as the most critical since white settlement began in Australia in 1788. The unlikely close relationship between the two is the source of a significant degree of historical controversy but historians never question for a moment the assertion that General Douglas MacArthur was the key figure in the land and air military operations which ultimately resulted in the expulsion of the Japanese from Papua and New Guinea to the north of Australia and ended the threat of invasion. This judgment applies even if it might be argued that the Japanese had never genuinely conceived any plan to land armed forces on the Australian mainland. Nor is this intended to downplay the fact that it was initially the success of the US naval forces at the Coral Sea and Midway which created the situation whereby land victory was subsequently possible.

But my brief today is to go beyond the broad parameters of the story and talk specifically and in detail about the relationship between John Curtin—a trade unionist and journalist, short in stature and an alcoholic off and on at several stages in his life—and Douglas MacArthur—a larger than life American hero—constantly a focal point for controversy, but one whose impact on the Philippines and on Japanese society cannot be overstated. Physically large where Curtin was slight; clearly to the right on any political spectrum whereas the young Curtin saw revolutionary socialism as one path to achieving the human values he cherished; an autocratic military figure where Curtin's great achievements were all made possible by his absolute loyalty to his political party and colleagues; MacArthur was nevertheless able to work with his Australian colleague in a manner which is the stuff of

legend and indeed of at least one play commissioned by the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in Australia, 'The Shadow of the Eagle'.

As I endeavour to analyse the key elements of this partnership let me make absolutely clear that much of the criticism which has been made in Australia concerning the Curtin-MacArthur relationship is focussed on the proposition that it was Curtin on behalf of Australia who was sacrificing too much of his nation's sovereignty in allowing MacArthur to make the decisions he did concerning the use of American and Australian troops. In the later stages of the war too it can be argued that Curtin did not react sufficiently to MacArthur's disinclination to allow Australian troops to participate actively in offensive against the Japanese stages once the war tide had definitely turned. None of this debate alters the fact that the relationship between the two men was set by the already quoted words MacArthur is said to have spoken to Curtin 'the man I called the heart and soul of Australia' at the very outset:

Mr Prime Minister, we two, you and I, will see this thing through together. We can do it and we will do it. You take care of the rear and I will handle the front.<sup>7</sup>

This is in fact essentially what did occur even if it is probably true that MacArthur 'had more to give to Curtin than Curtin him' and that MacArthur has been said on other occasions to have also adopted a similar approach when 'propitiating powerful political figures who might cause difficulties'.<sup>8</sup> In this sense Curtin was effectively taking care of those forces which could undermine MacArthur from behind leaving MacArthur to lead from the front with most military actions and to the extent that Curtin announced that orders from MacArthur should be considered by the commanders as emanating from the Commonwealth Government.<sup>9</sup> In MacArthur's own Reminiscences he described his relationship with Curtin in terms of

a sense of mutual trust, cooperation and regard that was never once breached by word, thought or deed.<sup>10</sup>

From Curtin's point of view he summed up the situation when he spoke in Parliament the day before MacArthur himself addressed Parliament:

Unified command in the person of one who enjoys authority of the highest order, both here and in America, is a vital condition for the defence of Australia and for the gradual organization of offensive action against Japan.<sup>11</sup>

The Curtin-MacArthur relationship is all the more significant because if MacArthur was seen at the time and since as the saviour of Australia in its darkest hour Curtin is now regarded in many quarters as one of the greatest ever Prime Ministers. On other occasions I will explore this judgment at greater length but suffice to say now that here was a self-educated man from a humble background who had suffered significant personal lifestyle

challenges as well as major political setbacks and was only elected as leader of his party by one vote, probably helped by the fact that he did not live in either Victoria or New South Wales where Labor leaders were most often located and between which there were frequent power struggles.

At this point it is necessary to deal with the issue of whether it was Curtin himself who suggested that MacArthur in 1942 be appointed Supreme Commander of all Allied forces in the south-west Pacific. Put most simply by Curtin biographer David Day:

MacArthur's appointment to Australia was ostensibly in response to an invitation by Curtin, although it was an invitation that Curtin had been prompted to make by Roosevelt.<sup>12</sup>

Day indicates that the possible appointment had been discussed for almost three months. Richard Casey, Australia's ambassador to Washington at the time, had advised that Roosevelt should be pre-empted by 'making the suggestion ourselves, in the interest of future harmonious working together'. However, nothing was going to occur involving MacArthur until the losses in the Philippines made Australia henceforth the 'best base from which forces could be amassed to mount a future offensive against Japan'. According to Gavin Long's account in his book *MacArthur as Military Commander*<sup>13</sup> MacArthur was informed on 22 February in the closing stages of the conflict in the Philippines that 'arrangements were in hand to appoint him to command of the Allied forces in the south-west Pacific, with headquarters in Australia and on 25 February that he could decide the time of his departure'. This was originally set as 15 March but MacArthur then decided on 10 March to proceed to Mindanao which was reached on 14 March and after a short delay with aircraft he arrived in Australia as previously indicated on 17 March. On news of MacArthur's arrival Major General George H. Brett then the commander of US military forces in Australia telephoned Curtin and informed him it would be

- (a) 'highly acceptable' to the President and
- (b) 'pleasing to the American people'

if the Australian Government nominated MacArthur as the Supreme Commander of all Allied forces in the south-west Pacific. Within the day the Australian War Cabinet agreed and Curtin informed Washington and London accordingly.<sup>14</sup> At the same time it should be noted that other Australian historians, including Bob Wurth, author of the most recent work on Curtin as a war time Prime minister, specifically state that 'it was Curtin who had recommended MacArthur for the post'.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, however, these interpretations leave out other earlier parts of the story. On the one hand during the critical first few weeks of 1942 the Australian military commanders had perforce to focus on which specific areas within Australia should be the prime focus for defence arrangements in the event of a Japanese invasion. Although there

was no official decision to adopt a 'Brisbane line' approach and develop a strategy for only defending areas south of that line, Army Minister Forde (whose electorate was in north Queensland) seems to have felt it necessary to recommend that the Government should decide 'to defend the whole of the populated area of Australia'.<sup>16</sup> At this uncertain time the government's approach was transformed by the news that the Australian 6th and 7th divisions were returning from the Middle East and that an American division was to come to Australia along with the fact that a 'relatively substantial naval force' was already in the Anzac area. On 28 February the Chiefs of Staff of Australia and New Zealand in planning a joint strategy advised the need for the appointment by a United States–United Kingdom Anzac Council sitting in Washington of a Supreme Commander, preferably an American. At this stage it was assumed that the choice would be Lieutenant-General George Brett, at the time commanding the American forces in Australia. However, nine days later (on 9 March) Roosevelt sent a telegram to Churchill suggesting that

the whole responsibility for the Pacific area should rest on the United States, the Supreme Commander being an American.<sup>17</sup>

All this was at the time when arrangements were being made for MacArthur to leave the Philippines.

Under the new arrangements MacArthur was to be directly responsible for the South-West Pacific Area while the South Pacific was under the direct control of Fleet Admiral King who appointed Vice Admiral Chormley as the area commander but in turn under the direction of Admiral Nimitz, the overall Commander-Chief of the whole 'Pacific Ocean Area'. In effect there were two defence areas but at the same time the main US fleet was under a single commander.

Australian historian Gavan Long argues that Roosevelt's decision 'to order MacArthur to Australia' was 'somewhat influenced' both by a fear that 'Australian morale was gravely declining' and by Roosevelt's concern about disputes between Churchill and Curtin both on the proposed return of Australian troops from the Middle East and also about the appointment of Robert Casey, a former non Labor politician and the first Australian ambassador (titled Australian Minister at the time) to Washington, as British Minister of State in the Middle East. Curtin had appreciated the value of Casey's good relationship with Roosevelt and the latter had told Churchill of his concern about 'what publicly appears to be a rather strained relationship at a critical time between the United Kingdom and Australia'.<sup>18</sup>

The focus then on the MacArthur appointment was as needed to 'bolster the morale' of the people of Australia and New Zealand'. By contrast, this claim of the need to bolster morale has been disputed by other observers who argue that what the Australian Government was really seeking was an appointment to satisfy its demands for 'a unified command of all forces' and 'to attract American reinforcements into the Australian zone'. To

reinforce his argument Curtin had told the American people in a radio broadcast on 14 March that Australia was 'the last bastion between the west coast of America and the Japanese. If Australia goes, the Americas are wide open.'<sup>19</sup> It is true also that Australian leaders and public may have known little about the actuality of MacArthur's experiences in the Philippines but they saw him as a 'strong leader' and one who would 'fight back' when under great pressure. As for the public reaction, Curtin's biographer David Day has suggested that

this John Wayne like figure, with his penchant for dramatic language and theatrical behaviour, seemed to have stepped out of a Saturday matinee.

Indeed, in the words of one Australian newsreel man MacArthur's arrival caused the greatest sigh of relief that has ever happened in any country.<sup>20</sup>

The reality at the time, however, was still stark. According to General George Brett 'en route to Melbourne MacArthur had been startled to discover that he had less than 25,000 American troops at his disposal in Australia and 'most had been assigned to duty with air units'.<sup>21</sup>

To put these events into perspective it is worth again going back a few months to fill in further some of the gaps in the story. In this context of course, the single event which has rightly been seen as a major turning point in Australian history was the publication of Curtin's New Year Message towards the end of 1941 in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour and the sinking two days later on the British cruisers *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. His words which reverberated equally within Australia itself and in the Allied High Command centred on the assertion that

without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

The full significance of these words will be the subject of a separate article but it is clear that the message was partly designed to stiffen the resolve of the Australian public as well as an indication of the source from which support would be sought (and it has to be said with the unfounded assumption that Russia could be brought into the war as a partner for Britain against the Japanese). On the very day after Curtin's message was published, though not as a consequence of the message, American General George Brett arrived in Australia as head of the first American forces to be stationed in Australia and this was followed with a growing realisation that Australia rather than the Philippines would have to be the central base for America to combat the Japanese advance.<sup>23</sup> Given the ongoing conflicts between Curtin and Churchill over the disposition of Australian forces Curtin was anxiously seeking the opportunity of a more direct link with Roosevelt and the opportunity of bypassing Churchill. This attitude only strengthened with the bombing of Darwin and the fall of Singapore and in mid-March Curtin had his foreign minister Dr Herbert Evatt go to the

US to press for 'more military supplies and for a Pacific War Council to be established there [in Washington] on which Australia could help to decide Pacific strategy'. As already indicated Curtin also took the unusual course of making a radio broadcast to the American people in the course of which he referred to Australia as 'the last bastion between the West Coast of America and the Japanese' and emphasised his determination to dispel any talk of Australia agreeing to a compromise peace with Japan. 'like the French had done with Hitler'.<sup>24</sup> It was against this backdrop that the appointment of MacArthur as Supreme Commander in the Pacific came as an enormously welcome relief to Curtin, his government and the Australian people at large. Certainly, for Evatt who had been bargaining with Churchill for many weeks concerning the level of British commitment to the Pacific War it was opportune to urge Curtin to ensure that MacArthur made the strongest possible appeals for reinforcements'.

Curtin's in his speeches at the time made his and his nation's attitude abundantly clear stressing 'a feeling of deep gratitude to the President and people of the United States' at a time when it was apparent that 'Great Britain...could not carry the burden of the Pacific while engaged in a life-and-death struggle with Germany and Italy'.<sup>25</sup> In this context Curtin endorsed enthusiastically the notion of 'unified command, in the person of one who enjoys authority of the highest order, both here and in America' and 'the presence in this country of substantial numbers of American armed forces'.<sup>26</sup>

In reviewing the 'rapid diminution of Australian anxieties' between the last week of March and the first week of May Gavan Long suggests that 'the sequence of events began with the news of MacArthur's arrival and the reorganisation of command which followed, the return of men of the AIF...the fact that the weeks passed and no large-scale attack occurred' and ended with the victory in the Coral Sea battle allowing Australian General Sir Thomas Blarney to suggest that the chief aim henceforth would be to 'move forward carrying the fight into enemy territory as soon as possible'.<sup>27</sup> This feeling of relief in Australia with the arrival of MacArthur has to be set against the views asserted by the authors of one of the biographies of MacArthur that on hearing about the alleged Brisbane line proposal MacArthur could only 'whisper miserably...God have mercy upon us'.<sup>28</sup>

However, to reiterate, it is beyond dispute that in encouraging and welcoming MacArthur's appointment Australia was making a 'notable surrender of sovereignty' with its homeland being defended by forces whose Commander-in-Chief was an American, 'responsible to and directed by the American Chiefs of Staff'.<sup>29</sup> It is also extraordinary that such an effective relationship should develop between a general whose political allegiances would have to be considered Republican and a prime minister and government which while only arguably socialistic were certainly to the left and centre left of Australian politics. In addition, the relationship blossomed even though MacArthur appointed only Americans to lead every branch of his staff and although Australian General Thomas Blarney was

appointed to lead the Allied Land Forces, American commanders led the Allied Naval and Air Forces respectively.<sup>30</sup>

In my view the evidence suggests that it is not too much of an overstatement to argue, as cited earlier from MacArthur's own reminiscences that his relationship with Curtin 'came to a sense of mutual trust, cooperation, and regard that was never once breached by word, thought or deed'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, as already indicated, no convincing evidence has emerged to challenge the MacArthur assertion that he told Curtin in Canberra in 1942 that 'Mr Prime Minister we two, you and I, will see this thing through together...You take care of the rear and I will handle the front'.<sup>32</sup> On 26 March Marshall attended a meeting of the Advisory War Council, which included Opposition representatives as well as government ministers, and both he and Admiral King argued consistently for the need for a great focus on the Pacific War. It is also of no little significance that the opportunity was taken in Canberra for the American Ambassador on behalf of the President to present MacArthur with the Medal of Honour. Speaking at a function in Parliament that evening MacArthur told the audience that he had come 'as a soldier in a great crusade' and to achieve 'ultimate victory' he pledged 'all the mighty power of my country and all the blood of my countrymen'.<sup>33</sup>

In the weeks leading to the Coral Sea Battle both MacArthur in Australia and Admiral King in Washington were urging more reinforcements for the Pacific Area the only difference being MacArthur's assertion that the Pacific in the short term should be seen as the 'predominant theatre; of war whereas King accepted the 'Hitler First' strategy. Even so King also insisted that 'the needs of the Pacific theatre were being dangerously neglected'.<sup>34</sup> In considering these issues it needs to be reiterated that as early as Immediately after Pearl Harbour the American leaders decided to establish a military base in Australia and although the British and American leaders focussed on concentrating first on Hitler's Germany there were a chain of small naval bases across the Pacific and some 30,000 troops (air, anti-aircraft and base staff) to be stationed in Australia.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, with the fall of Singapore imminent the decision to relocate two divisions of Australian troops in Australia also led to the decision to send the 41st and the 32nd American divisions to Australia. In total by the end of April 57,000 American troops had been sent to Australia (or at least landed there on their way to Java and India).

As already indicated one issue in the 'surrender of sovereignty' argument concerned the chain of command under MacArthur's leadership. Certainly General Blarney was appointed Commander Allied Land Forces while retaining his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Army.<sup>36</sup> As such then he commanded all those Australian troops not directly under MacArthur's control and also both the American and Australian forces within MacArthur's aegis. At the same time In this regard it should be noted that there was no counterpart in the Australian Navy or Air Force to Blarney's role as the 'one senior



military adviser who was also the commander of all the Australian troops' and MacArthur did not find it acceptable to adopt the Australian proposal that the Australian Chief of the Air Staff should have within his command a comparable role to Blarney's. Blarney's position was thus unique within the MacArthur command.

One other area of controversy which heightened 'the surrender of sovereignty controversy' came with MacArthur's decision already referred to not to follow General Marshall's advice, and even though it was indicated as the 'President's wish', and appoint some Australian and Dutch officers to senior posts on his staff.<sup>377</sup> Instead he appointed an American 'to lead every branch of his staff' and with 'eight of the eleven heads being officers who had come from the Philippines with him'. In explaining this decision he asserted that 'the Australians did not have enough staff officers for their own needs'. By contrast Australian war historians have argued that at the time 'the Australian Army possessed senior specialists in all fields of staff work who were at least highly qualified academically as the Americans'<sup>38</sup>.

If the failure to insist on Australian staff appointments can be seen as indicative of weakness on Curtin's side, on the other side of the ledger Curtin rejected the proposed directive from Washington<sup>39</sup> which included giving MacArthur 'the power to deploy Australian forces that included conscripted militia, that is those soldiers who had joined the citizens' forces and could be conscripted within Australian territory. Instead Curtin had the proposal amended to give the Australian Government 'ultimate control of the disposition of Australian forces outside of its own territory'. At the same time in terms of 'taking care of the rear' he agreed to the introduction of industrial conscription which was totally opposed to traditional ALP policy<sup>40</sup> and which he himself had strongly opposed during the First World War. In his words

There is no other way, but a few of my colleagues find it hard to accept. But it will be all right'.<sup>41</sup>

During the weeks while MacArthur developed plans to reinforce the garrison in New Guinea as late as 19 May there were still only two garrisons each of brigade strength and defensive movements in Australia. Interestingly, as one indication of a key element in the MacArthur-Curtin relationship, a few days before the Coral Sea Battle in May Curtin acted on a request from MacArthur to seek aid from Churchill for reinforcements in New Guinea including British troops destined for India. In this regard it is worth noting that MacArthur was certainly correct in his assumption that the Japanese would 'postpone large operations against India' and 'continue movement to the south as incurring less risk for their forces. On this occasion Churchill contacted Roosevelt asking whether MacArthur 'had any authority from the United States for taking such a line' and MacArthur was rebuked by Roosevelt for using 'this unorthodox channel of communication',<sup>42</sup> In addition, Churchill informed Curtin directly that there was no sign of 'mass invasion' of Australia by the

Japanese. Nevertheless anxiety was developing in Australia only to be relieved by the major Allied victory at Midway Island in the first days of June allowing MacArthur when he met with Curtin on 11 June to declare that 'the security of Australia had now been assured'. Even then in his public speeches Curtin played down the significance of the Midway victory claiming that the battles were 'far from decisive in the struggle through which we must pass' and that 'Australians Still face invasion'.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly, however, by early July the military situation was transformed from the purely defensive with the issuing of a directive on 2 July that the objective was to seize the 'New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea area'. Interestingly, in the lead up to this decision MacArthur had argued in his second meeting with the Australian Advisory War Council that in opposition to the 'defeat Germany first strategy' he proposed that an attack on New Guinea would be a more effective means of establishing a second front against Germany rather than seeking such a goal in Europe.

The changing war time environment and strategies were reflected on 20 July with MacArthur's advance of his own headquarters from Melbourne to Brisbane, some 800 miles nearer to New Guinea. Where his arrival in Melbourne in March had been greeted by political leaders, reporters and an enthusiastic public his arrival in Brisbane was 'without fanfare'. According to Australian Army Intelligence documents a whispering campaign to the effect that MacArthur had already arrived in Brisbane 'was so effective that when, in due course, MacArthur did arrive in Brisbane not one civilian was in the vicinity of the railway station and the passage of his car from the station to his Headquarters and thence to his place of residence attracted little public attention'. Only his aide escorted him from the railway station to the Hotel where he, his wife and son would live in apartments on the top floor and his arrival was 'never reported in *The Courier Mail*'. Indeed in some instances American newspapers published photos of MacArthur in Brisbane 'with captions indicating that was their arrival in Australia'. Nevertheless, inevitably within Brisbane townspeople would have had numerous opportunities to see MacArthur moving from his hotel to office in the AMP building.<sup>44</sup>

The next few weeks were critical in determining the outcome of the war with the Japanese seeking to advance from Kokoda through the Owen Stanley Ranges in order to capture Port Moresby which it was intended to enable Australia to be isolated from the Americans. At the time of his move to Brisbane MacArthur was taking steps to counter the reliable intelligence he was receiving about the Japanese plans but the Australians suffered significant setbacks in the early stages and at one stage in mid September the Japanese came within 25 miles of Port Moresby. At MacArthur's urging Blamey was sent to Port Moresby a decision which caused some angst amongst Curtin's colleagues who were concerned that if Port Moresby fell Blamey 'would fall with it'.<sup>45</sup> (interestingly, MacArthur successfully opposed any suggestion that Curtin himself should join Blamey there referring

to the 'unnecessary strain and hazard of such a trip').<sup>46</sup> This, however, was the closest the Japanese were to come to Australia on land and dating from September 18 the Japanese, plagued by supply problems began to withdraw back along what became known as the Kokoda Trail. During these hectic weeks MacArthur and Curtin in their appeal for British ships and American divisions were rebuffed again and again by Churchill and Roosevelt and in this regard David Day has argued that while ultimately the Allied commanders had been proved correct that Australia would not be invaded 'much of the anxiety and bitterness of the period could have been avoided if Curtin and MacArthur had been taken in the confidence of the British and American governments'.<sup>47</sup> As it was, Curtin declined an invitation to go to the United States to present his case personally to Roosevelt though in any case during August-September the military situation meant this would not have been feasible.

The tide of war in the New Guinea area was now definitely turning and by the end of September 'a formidable Allied force was assembled in Papua'<sup>48</sup> enabling MacArthur on 1 October to issue orders for an offensive with two separate lines of advance including one by Australians through Kokoda and others with coastline landings. The day after he issued these operation instructions MacArthur visited New Guinea for the first time and in November he was able to establish advanced headquarters at Port Moresby, In the meantime Curtin celebrated his first anniversary as prime minister. In paying tribute to Curtin, American minister Nelson Johnson suggested that 'no one who could have foreseen the burdens and disasters that fate had in store would willingly have undertaken Government leadership' but that Curtin 'possessed the high moral courage necessary to take up the burden and carry it on'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed the 'black blanket of despair' had been lifted and in the words of the *Sunday Telegraph* the government's balance sheet 'showed a handsome credit-attributed in large measure to Curtin personally.

At the beginning of November the Australians reached Kokoda itself and with the aid of increasing American air power the Japanese suffered heavy losses in a naval battle in Guadalcanal and at three beachheads in New Guinea. By 11 January 1943 Curtin felt able to congratulate MacArthur for victory in New Guinea with the defeat of 'a tenacious and stubborn foe'. It had been success achieved through 'comradeship in arms'. Certainly by the end of January with the loss of 13,000 of the Japanese troops who originally landed there the Japanese had been effectively defeated in Papua. In the aftermath of these successes which culminated in the Bismarck Sea battle in March 1943 when American and Australian bombers destroyed 'an important Japanese reinforcement convoy in the Bismarck Sea which was attempting to land troops in New Guinea' MacArthur was appointed to the Grand Cross of the British Order of the Bath.<sup>50</sup>

Towards the end of the New Guinea campaign Curtin for his part made his position clear in speaking to the House of Representatives:

The position of General MacArthur in Australia is unique. He is commander of a foreign though friendly power with its headquarters located in the country of another Government which has continued to exercise all its sovereign powers, but assigned to him its combat forces which for long constituted the great bulk of his command.<sup>51</sup>

and

I vividly recall the critical stage of the New Guinea campaign where every civil air service in Australia was suspended to provide the Commander-in-Chief with temporary aircraft to support his operations. The incident was typical of the close cooperation between General MacArthur and the Government.

In the meantime the relationship between Curtin and MacArthur had also been vividly demonstrated with Curtin's successful campaign to bring about a significant change (politically if not in terms of war strategy) in his party policy towards the conscription of men for military service overseas. The existing Labor policy countenanced the existence of two separate armies; the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) recruited to fight overseas and composed entirely of volunteers and the partly conscripted Australian Military Force known as the militia (as distinct from the permanent soldiers) who could not be conscripted to serve outside Australian territory. While the latter had been able to serve in Papua and New Guinea under the existing rules 'there would be little scope for deploying them in battle as the war moved further away from Australia'.<sup>52</sup> Pressure for a change came not only from Opposition MPs but also in America itself where observers commented on conscripted Americans fighting beyond Australian territory to defend Australia, while conscripted Australian were restricted to fighting only on Australian territory.

MacArthur himself 'urged Curtin to resolve the issue before it affected the flow of American reinforcements to his command' and in the US General Marshall sent Roosevelt copies of damaging articles to this effect which had appeared in the American press.<sup>53</sup> Faced with this situation Curtin boldly confronted the question of revising Australia's staunch attitude in the light of the new circumstances'.<sup>54</sup> In World War One Labor prime minister Hughes had split his party on the question of introducing military conscription for overseas (during which time Curtin himself had spent a few days in gaol for his opposition to conscription) but on this occasion Curtin was able to win the day both because of his skill in keeping his intentions from his colleagues for as long as possible but also by adopting a compromise which would entail making it possible to conscript militia for service outside Australian territory but only 'in territories associated with the defence of Australia'. During the heated debate which ensued over the next few weeks Curtin was accused by one of his colleagues of 'putting young men in the slaughterhouse, although thirty years ago you wouldn't go into it yourself. Curtin 'w'ept' but 'he did not back down'.<sup>55</sup>

On 4 January 1943 a special Labor Conference voted 24 to 12 to make the change though when the legislation went through Parliament it was on a rather more restrictive basis than Curtin had intended with New Zealand and New Caledonia excluded and the definition of {Australian territory' bordered at the north by the Equator and to the east by the Solomons. In this regard it is worth noting that only during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s have Australians ever been conscripted for military service north of the Equator.

The period of greatest danger had come and gone during twelve months and more with MacArthur and Curtin at the helm in Australia from March 1942. Already, in his Australia Day broadcast to the Australian people and heard also by millions in Britain and America New Year's message in 1943 Curtin had described Australia as {grateful, everlastingly grateful to the United States of America' while arguing that 'delay on the Allied side is a consolidating opportunity for a ruthless and unrelenting enemy'. MacArthur for his part described the speech as 'magnificent measured by any standard of strategy, courage, patriotism or common sense'.<sup>56</sup> In this context Australian war historian Gavin Long was unstinting in his praise when assessing MacArthur's first year as Commander-in-Chief taking the view that 'on each land front...periods of frustration and anxiety had ended in decisive success...and MacArthur's planning had been bold and imaginative'. As a consequence MacArthur 'could now resume the planning of the larger offensive' which the enemy had interrupted.

This assessment came against the backdrop of the decisions at the Casablanca Conference which placed the Pacific War only fifth on the list of war priorities and led Curtin in his New Year message to deplore the fact that 'the relegation of this theatre to a holding war means that Japan is buying cheaply the time she requires to exploit the resources she has acquired'. Nevertheless on 10 June 1943 after meeting with Curtin in Sydney MacArthur announced that 'the days of the holding war were over and that it was time to begin the offensive against Japan'. Curtin concurred publicly with this view stating that while Australia was 'not yet immune from marauding raids which may cause much damage and loss' Australia would henceforth be used 'as a base from which to launch both limited and major offensives against Japan'.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile on the domestic front Curtin faced an election due by September 1943 and which gave him the opportunity to escape the political stranglehold of his dependence on independents in the House of Representatives and the Opposition parties in the Senate. Despite the embarrassment of having one of his more difficult ministers accuse the Opposition parties when in government of intending to adopt a Brisbane line defence strategy<sup>8</sup> Curtin went into an election campaign in July and August backed by massive public approval of his handling of the war effort and the historic support of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and this when the Murdoch and Packer presses were actively campaigning against him. The outcome of the election for Curtin was 'a stunning personal

victory' with the ALP achieving its biggest ever win before or since at the federal level and Curtin himself increasing his personal majority in his own seat from 600 to well over 20,000 votes and with the ALP winning every seat being contested in Western Australia.<sup>59</sup> Against this background sections of the press renewed 'their calls for him to travel to London and Washington' while Roosevelt was also urging Curtin to visit the United States, including Great Britain in the journey to assist in sorting out differences with Churchill. At this very time the President's wife arrived in Australia and while she was staying with the Governor General and his wife at Government House MacArthur sent American General Robert Eichelberger to represent him. Eichelberger met and spoke with Curtin and informed MacArthur that he liked him [Curtin] because he showed a very deep and sincere affection for you' and he indicated to me that 'no Australian could have done more for this country than MacArthur had done'.<sup>60</sup>

The fruits of the Curtin-MacArthur relationship had been substantial but pressures began to mount as the immediate threat to Australia was replaced by planning for the future with the intended strategy plans in the Pacific Area still to be fully formulated by those advising Churchill and Roosevelt. In October Curtin cabled Churchill and having received no reply on 22 November he wrote to MacArthur asking 'for advice of prospective plans in regard to the use of the Australian land forces' including information which would enable the Australian Government to be 'at least broadly aware of your plans for the employment of the Australian forces in any areas outside Australia and [its] mandated territory'.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, he pointed out to MacArthur that 'Australia had a special interest in the employment of her own troops to drive the Japanese from her New Guinea territories'. He went on to say that his requests were 'not prompted by any desire to interfere with your conduct of operations, or to participate in the formulation of plans' but 'solely of the responsibility to the Australian people which must be exercised by myself and the Australian Government'.<sup>62</sup> In a letter written two days later MacArthur replied that he would promise to give Curtin his 'general concept of the campaign in such detail as you may desire but that 'his operations depended on decisions made in Washington'. The two men subsequently met in Brisbane at the end of the month with Curtin obtaining agreement that Australia could 'rebalance its war effort' to relieve its desperate manpower shortage in a range of industries Day At the same time he assured MacArthur

Australia's war effort, whatever shape it may take by this process of readjustment, will be the maximum of which Australia is capable.<sup>63</sup>

and in a national broadcast

I am indebted to General MacArthur for the high statesmanship and breadth of world vision he has contributed to the discussion. The complete integration of our concepts, which has been the source of such strength in the past, will continue to the end.<sup>64</sup>

1944, the last year during which Curtin was in sufficiently good health to exercise to any feasible extent the role and power of the prime ministership, also became the year during which in many respects he was returning to 'a commitment to the British Empire as the surest way of providing for Australia's post-war security. In this approach he received much support and encouragement from Defence Secretary Shedden and on the party political front it was seen by his biographer as reflecting his determination to 'end the non-Labor parties' monopoly of the Union Jack'.<sup>65</sup> In this regard Curtin's decision to appoint the King's brother the Duke of Gloucester as Governor-General also had the desired effect of emphasising his (Curtin's) imperial loyalty.<sup>66</sup> While this approach was to be furthered by his speeches and appearances in the UK during an overseas trip subsequently during the year, a visit to the United States was also a key part of the agenda and despite some reported resentment towards the US for its delay in entering the war there is no suggestion that Curtin's friendship with MacArthur remained other than close.<sup>67</sup>

Curtin's new found imperial policy was soon put to the test when one of Curtin's ministers left winger Eddie Ward launched an all-out attack in Parliament at Britain for its 'colonial record' and 'its failure to launch a second front in Europe and thereby take the pressure off Russia'.<sup>68</sup> Although Curtin brought Ward back into line, former prime minister Menzies as the new leader of the Opposition and United Australia Party in protest announced the withdrawal of his party from attendance at the Advisory War Council. Significantly however, this decision was not supported by a number of UAP members nor by the allied Opposition party the Country Party.

On 17 March 1944 MacArthur was invited to dinner at Parliament house to commemorate the second anniversary of his arrival in Australia. At the dinner the outgoing Governor-General Lord Gowrie invested MacArthur with a British knighthood bestowed on him by the King 'on Curtin's recommendation' and 'for services rendered in the saving of Australia'.<sup>69</sup>

MacArthur himself spoke at length on 'his future offensive to recapture the Philippines' and Curtin, realising 'that their relationship was coming to an end' reflected on 'the experience of entrusting Australian forces to an officer of another country'. In this context he indicated he was 'glad to say' that MacArthur had

exhibited a regard for the rights of this Government and its people, which could not have been exceeded if he had been an officer of our own army.<sup>70</sup>

David Day suggests<sup>71</sup> that on their return to the Lodge that evening the two men 'talked of the holiday they would take when the war was won'. Shortly afterwards (19 April) Curtin set off on his first and only overseas visit while Prime Minister with the United States, Canada and the UK on the itinerary. Shortly before his departure the *Melbourne Age* wrote of

the really remarkable influence which Mr. Curtin exercised upon the House and upon his own Ministers. Time and again he stepped into the breach and rescued some of them from awkward situations.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, in the words of the *Sydney Morning Herald* Curtin had changed 'from a party leader to a statesman' and even may be 'on the road to becoming an imperial statesman'.<sup>73</sup>

Having travelled by ship Curtin reached San Francisco on 19 April and went thence by train to Washington where official talks began on 23 April. He met with numerous British and American officials and later with the combined chiefs of staff but although he met with Roosevelt the time available was limited and Roosevelt while satisfied with Australia's war effort pulling its weight in the boat'-was critical of Australia's decision at the beginning of the year to sign a mutual defence pact with New Zealand (the Anzac Pact) which was seen 'as an attack on American interests and ambitions in the Pacific. Curtin for his part conceded that in this regard Australia had shown what 'may well prove to be an excess of enthusiasm' in order to affirm its own significance in the Pacific.<sup>74</sup> Subsequently in Britain Curtin received little support for proposals for developing a more formal structure of Empire cooperation for the future though he did gain agreement with Churchill for significant military resources to be made available for civil production to overcome manpower shortages. He then reported briefly on his British talks during a short return visit to the US. On 26 June his ship arrived back in Brisbane where he was met by MacArthur. Interestingly, one of the pieces of information Curtin could convey to MacArthur was that he had told Roosevelt 'a dozen times' that MacArthur had no idea of running for the presidency. Curtin said

I am sure that every night when he turned in, the President had been looking under the bed to make dead sure you weren't there.<sup>75</sup>

In the meantime from April the face of the war effort and the Curtin-MacArthur relationship had begun to move in a very different direction when American forces effectively took over military operations in New Guinea and surrounding areas where Australian previously had provided the bulk of the ground forces. According to Australian war historian Gavin Long

Henceforward in MacArthur's plan his Americans would lead the advance and under American command...MacArthur in effect had two task forces : Blarney's Australian Army Group and [Lieutenant -General Walter] Krueger's Sixth Army, now



poised to undertake the next phase of the offensive, the invasion of New Britain.<sup>76</sup>

In the last week of July 1944 MacArthur won the President's support (against vigorous support for alternative strategies) for his proposed advance to retake the Philippines. In September 1944 MacArthur moved his headquarters to Hollandia (on the northern frontier of Dutch New Guinea) from Brisbane which by that stage was more than 2000 miles behind the forward troops.<sup>77</sup> It was at this time that he met Curtin for the last time and in the following month he went ashore on the first day of the US landing at Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. Thus began the final stages of MacArthur's achievement of his goal of returning to the Philippines and bringing it once more under American control. In the same period the Curtin-MacArthur relationship in any case was effectively to come to an end with the serious deterioration in Curtin's health leading to his death in July 1945, making him at that time only the second Australian prime minister to die in office. Indeed the last phase of Curtin's life can be dated from November 1944 to January 1945 when Forde had to act as prime minister in the wake of Curtin's hospitalisation with serious heart problems. Although he was then able to attend cabinet meetings for two to three months he became ill again and while he lived to learn of the German surrender he died several weeks before the Japanese surrender in August. Earlier in May he had been informed of the Australian troops landing at Tarakan Island off Dutch Borneo

David Day, Curtin's most recent biographer, argues that to criticise Curtin 'for too readily handing over authority to MacArthur...fails to take in account the desperate outlook for Australia at the time.'<sup>78</sup> Under Curtin's leadership it is not too much to say that Australia's role in the Pacific War was epitomised by MacArthur's role. In this regard it is difficult to disagree with Day's closing assertion that perhaps Curtin's greatest triumph as prime minister:

was the relationship of cooperation that he developed with MacArthur, one that was based on apparently genuine feelings of friendship and admiration, as much as mutual self-interest.<sup>79</sup>

These two men, so different in temperament, political outlook, physical appearance and life experiences nevertheless were able to work together in a relationship epitomised by MacArthur's description of Curtin as 'the man I called the heart and soul of Australia'. At a time in November 1943 when Curtin was only too aware of his exclusion from the highest level decision making processes of the war he nevertheless insisted concerning his discussions at length with MacArthur that he was indebted to the General

for the high statesmanship and breadth of world vision he has contributed to the discussion. The complete integration of our concepts, which has been a source of such strength in the past will continue to the end'.<sup>80</sup>

And when MacArthur insisted that when he stood 'at the gates of Manila' he wanted the 'President of the Commonwealth [President Quezon who had established a government in exile in Melbourne) at my right hand] and the Prime Minister of Australia at my left' Curtin responded that while he could not pledge that the prime minister of Australia would be there since 'That depends on the people of Australia' however 'I can pledge that John Curtin will be there'. Sadly, Curtin like Quezon did not live to fulfil his pledge.

David Black

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1 David (D.M.) Horner, 'Douglas MacArthur' in J. Ritchie (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 15 1940-1980, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp. 150-152.

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 See, for example, Bob Wurth, *The Battle for Australia: A nation and its leader under siege*, Sydney: Pan MacMillan, 2013, p. 198

4 Ibid.

5 Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964. p. 151.

6 In August 1941 then prime minister Robert Menzies was deposed as prime minister and party leader by his own United Australia Party (UAP) and replaced as prime minister by Arthur Fadden, leader of the coalition partner Country Party. Then in October two independents who had previously supported the non-Labor government voted against part of the government's budget and after consultation with leaders of both the government and Labor Opposition the Governor-General commissioned Curtin to form a government as prime minister. This is the last occasion to date when a national government has lost office in this manner.

7 See for example, David Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 202; *MacArthur*, *Reminiscences*, p. 151; *Wurth*, *The Battle for Australia*, p. 269; Horner, p. 151; Gavin Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969, p. 86..

8 This comment is based on information supplied by John Edwards, author of *Curtin's Gift*,

9 Cited in Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 202.

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10 Gavin Long, *MacArthur as Military Commander*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1969, p. 86

11 From speech delivered in the House of Representatives on 25 March 1942; see Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 203-204.

12 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 462.

13 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 81

14 Ibid.

15 Wurth, *The Battle for Australia*, p. 260.

16 Gavin Long, *The Six Years War. A Concise History of Australia in the 1939-45 War*, Sydney: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1973, p. 174. Under this arrangement the middle area including India and the Mediterranean was to be a British zone, and the responsibility for the Atlantic-Western European area was to be shared between the United States and Britain.

17 Ibid., p. 176

18 Ibid., p. 177.

19 Cited in Day, *John Curtin A Life*, pp. 459-460.

- 20 Ibid., pp. 461-462.
- 21 Wurth, *The Battle for Australia*, p. 263.
- 22 The full text of this famous message can be found in Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 193-196.
- 23 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 441.
- 24 Ibid., p. 459.
- 25 Black, *In His Own Words*, p. 202.
- 26 Ibid., pp. 203-204.
- 27 Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 181.
- 28 Clarke Lee and Richard Henschel, *Douglas MacArthur*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid, p. 182.
- 31 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 86.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 463.
- 34 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 87.
- 35 Ibid., p. 89.
- 36 Ibid., p. 92.
- 37 Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 182.
- 38 Ibid. See also Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 91.
- 39 Day, *John Curtin A life*, p. 465
- 40 Ibid., p. 466.
- 41 Ibid., pp. 466-467.
- 42 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*\_ p. 98 and Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 190.
- 43 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, pp. 475-476.
- 44 For the description of the circumstances of the MacArthur move to Brisbane see 'MacArthur in Brisbane' in MacArthur Museum Brisbane <http://www/mmb.org.au/site-page/macarthur-brisbane>.
- 45 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 486.
- 46 Ibid., p. 488.
- 47 Ibid, pp. 484-485.
- 48 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 110.
- 49 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, pp. 486-487.
- 50 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 119.
- 51 MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, p. 167.
- 52 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 489.
- 53 See footnote 58 in Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 489.
- 54 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 490.
- 55 Ibid., p. 491. See generally Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 214-218.
- 56 See *ibid.*, p. 213.
- 57 See Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 505.
- 58 See Black, *In His Own Words*, pp. 221-222.
- 59 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 515.
- 60 Ibid., pp. 515-516.
- 61 MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, p. 182.
- 62 See Day, *John Curtin A Life*, footnote 24, p. 521.
- 63 Ibid., p. 522.
- 64 MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, p. 183.
- 65 Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin for Labor and for Australia*, p. 14 cited in Day, *John Curtin A life*, p. 523.
- 66 Ibid., p. 524.
- 67 Ibid., p. 522.
- 68 Ibid., p. 529.
- 69 Ibid., p. 531.
- 70 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March 1944.
- 71 Day, *John Curtin A life*, p. 532.
- 72 Ibid., p. 534.
- 73 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1944.
- 74 Ibid., p. 538.

- 75 Long, *MacArthur as a Military Commander*, p. 147  
76 Ibid., p. 134.  
77 Ibid., p. 144.  
78 Day, *John Curtin A Life*, p. 583.  
79 Ibid., p. 584.  
80 MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, p. 183.