

# Soldiers to citizens

**-Karl James**

**For those troops serving in the islands at the end of the Second World War, the wait to return to Australia could be frustratingly slow, leading to protest and an act of sabotage.**

With the sudden end of the war, the Australian government was faced with the difficult problem of repatriating and demobilising hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women. This was not an unforeseen problem. The Department of Post-War Reconstruction had been formed at the end of 1942, and well before the end of the war the government had started to plan for demobilisation and begun reducing the size of the army.

In October 1943 the government had decided to release 20,000 servicemen from the army so they could be employed in other areas of the war economy. In August of the following year it was decided to reduce the army by another 30,000 men and the air force by 15,000. In mid-1945 the government approved the release of a limited number of “long service personnel” from the army. This meant that men and women who had completed five years’ full-time service, and who had spent at least two years overseas, could elect to be discharged. These plans allowed for the piecemeal reduction of the services; in June 1944 the government approved the principles, and in March 1945 the plan, for the full-scale “Demobilisation of the Australian Defence Forces”.

Priority for discharge was to be based on a points system. The higher the number of points, the higher the priority for demobilisation – or “demob” as it was called. Men received two points for each completed year based on their age at enlistment, plus two points for each month of service, and men with dependants gained an extra point for each month of service. Where the soldier served, whether at home or abroad, his rank and the number of his dependants did not matter. Women received three points for each completed year of age at enlistment, plus one point for each month of service. Women with dependants would be discharged first, followed by those women who were married before the end of hostilities. Women who married after the end of the war could apply to be released on compassionate grounds. The normal discharge rate was set at 3,000 people a day, six days a week.

With the plans already prepared, on 16 August 1945, the day after Japan’s capitulation, the government was able to put them into action. General demobilisation began on 1 October and continued until 15 February 1947. It was a massive undertaking. In August 1945 there were almost 600,000 Australian men and women in uniform. More than half of these were serving in Australia, but 224,000 were serving across the Pacific: from Borneo and Morotai in the Netherlands East Indies, New Guinea and New Britain, through to Bougainville in the north Solomons, as well as prisoners-of-war in Japan and in other parts of south-east Asia. Another

20,000 servicemen, mainly members of the air force, were also serving in Britain and other places.

Although the fighting was over, there was still plenty of work to do and a great demand was placed upon the limited amount of shipping that was available. Volunteers for the Japanese occupation force gathered on Morotai, while others became involved in war crimes trials. Soldiers with fewer priority points were transferred to replace those with higher points at military garrisons in areas that needed to be maintained until the re-establishment of civil administration. There were great numbers of Japanese prisoners who had to be disarmed and guarded prior to their repatriation. In November, for example, there were still 95,000 prisoners on Rabual and 26,000 on Fauro Island. There were also American and British forces in Australia and the Pacific who were competing for shipping.

Such pressures ensured that the repatriation of Australian troops would take months. Between October and December 1945 Australian ships and aircraft were able to lift 12,500 men a month, and following a request to the British government, the British aircraft carriers HMS Implacable, Glory and Formidable and other ships were employed for several months. By the end of the year, 76,000 personnel had returned to Australia by sea. There was many a stowaway on these ships, as enterprising soldiers felt that a fine, if caught, was reasonable payment for an early voyage home. They knew they would not be sent back to the islands.

For those still waiting, their days were mainly occupied with routine military duties or guarding Japanese prisoners. Much time was given to sporting competitions and, of course, "spine bashing". The army also ran educational and occupational training courses for the men, to help prepare them for their return to civilian life. Twenty hours each week were set aside for classes, ranging from ballroom dancing to hydraulic engineering. Teachers and instructors were selected on the basis of their civilian occupations. Refresher courses in basic subjects such as English and arithmetic were run first, followed by vocational subjects. Such activities kept otherwise idle men busy.

But for men who had already been serving in the islands for many months, the process was still frustratingly slow. On 10 December 1,500 "high points" men from the 1st Australian Base Sub Area on Morotai conducted a five-kilometre protest march carrying banners reading "WE WANT SHIPS NOT ASSURANCES", "WHERE IS OUR SHIPPING" and "GET US HOME FOR XMAS". Along the way, the protesters were joined by another 3,000 men from different units.

Elsewhere, one soldier, under a pseudonym, wrote to Prime Minister Ben Chifley to inform him of the "dissatisfaction that has risen among the Bougainville troops with your administration". The soldier asked, "Why must we stay here, on the brink of desperation, on this remote island, our job done?" How, he wondered, could Australia have come of age as a nation when she did not have the resources to transport "her sons a few hundred miles"?

The Prime Minister was soon to experience this frustration at first hand. With the intention of spending Christmas and the New Year with the troops, Chifley undertook a surprise tour of Australian bases in New Guinea and the Solomons. On 27 December Chifley's plane – a silver

C-47 Dakota – landed at Torokina on Bougainville. He was to have stayed only a few hours, but poor weather meant he would have to stay overnight. Chifley's pilot, Flying Officer Eric Holt, rang the RAAF station to make sure a guard was posted by the plane.

Around 10 pm, Chifley's secretary rang Holt to pass on a report that one of the plane's tyres had been let down. Holt and his crew immediately went to the aircraft and checked it for signs of interference. The port tyre's valve cap had been unscrewed and the tyre deflated. Holt could see no guard; it turned out he had been standing sentry at a silver Beaufighter 90 metres away. The Prime Minister was scheduled to leave at 7 am the next day, so Holt made arrangements for a test flight an hour earlier.

When Holt arrived at the airfield the next morning, he was told that on "run up", the port engine had kept dropping "revs". A quick check of the aircraft found that three spark plug leads had been disconnected. And when the fuel tanks' drain points were checked, the petrol ran out with a yellow discolouration. Holt assumed that this was the anti-malarial drug Atebrin, but the fuel ran clear before anyone thought to gather a sample. The engines were again "run up" and he took the plane for a flight. The aircraft performed well, and when Chifley arrived they took off as scheduled.

Holt later reported that the "interference would appear to me to have been made by a person familiar with aircraft". In the event, the saboteur (or saboteurs) was never discovered. But it is unlikely that this was in any sense an assassination attempt. As Holt observed, "The interference was of a very superficial nature and would be, and was, readily detected on daily inspection."

Most likely it was just a form of protest. Doubtless the men on Bougainville thought that if they had to stay on the island, then so too should the Prime Minister. It was fitting that this protest was likely to have been made with Atebrin, as the daily "Atebrin parade" was one of the aspects of military life most resented by the troops. (Prolonged usage could also turn a person's skin orange and was rumoured to make men impotent.)

As it turned out, they did not have much longer to wait. Most servicemen and women on Bougainville and the other islands were returned to Australia by March 1946. Among this group was Private John Ewen. Ewen had served in an infantry battalion and had kept detailed journal for the campaign. His final journal entry was written on 17 January 1946, on board the troopship *Anatina*, three days out from Bougainville. They hoped to be in Brisbane the next day. Ewen wrote there were officially 1,100 troops on board with about 200 stowaways.

Everybody on board is happy for at last we are heading in the right direction – Home. As I watched Bougainville sink into the mist I couldn't help but think that the 12 months I'd spent there seemed years and years. I thought of the chaps who were with me when we landed off the "Cape Victory" in Nov, and who will remain here forever. When I landed here shells were bursting on the point. When we left they were swimming and riding surf-boards ... The tucker is pretty crook and I'm looking forward to a good juicy steak.

Many returning men would have shared Ewen's sentiments. By the end of June, ten and a half months after the end of the war, 468,700 men and women had been discharged. Their last

military acts took place in dispersal centres in their home states. Here their weapons, uniform and equipment were exchanged for dental treatment as well as mandatory medical examinations and chest X-rays before being discharged. Soldiers also received information about civilian employment, land settlement, re-establishment loans, training and other benefits. It was here that soldiers also received their discharge certificates and “Returned from Active Service” badges. Then “Private Smith”, “to his astonishment”, as official historian Gavin Long put it, was addressed as Mister again.