

CHAPTER 24

LOOKING BACK

IN this final volume of the army series it is appropriate briefly to survey the Pacific war from an Australian point of view and in the light of facts some of which could not have been set out in earlier volumes without anticipating events that were outside their period.

The initial Japanese offensive of December 1941 to March 1942 reached its objectives more swiftly than the Japanese had expected. The offensive had been carefully planned, the Japanese soon commanded the sea and the air, their leaders and men were resolute and experienced, and in every area their opponents were ill-prepared to resist them.

The Japanese tactics were much the same as those which Nimitz and MacArthur used on the return journey in 1944 and 1945: several lines of advance, leapfrog movements which usually were not too long for each landing to be backed up by land-based aircraft, support by carrier-borne aircraft whenever the distances demanded it, sealing off and bypassing of centres of stubborn resistance.

The Japanese in 1942 followed their initial successes with a period of delay at a time when they should have exploited boldly. Like the Germans in 1940 the Japanese had no plan for achieving the total defeat of their opponents but relied on attaining certain limited objectives and on the hope that their enemies would grow tired of fighting and accept a negotiated peace, advantageous to the hitherto-victorious aggressor. When the Japanese began to move forward again the Allies were readier to meet them: in the Coral Sea and off Midway the Japanese suffered their first naval setbacks, at Milne Bay one of their landings was defeated for the first time, and soon, in the Solomons and Papua, they and their opponents were locked together in what developed into campaigns of attrition in which, increasingly, the Japanese had the worst of it. The selfless devotion of the Japanese fighting men could not offset the inescapable facts that the Americans possessed a strong and expert navy and merchant marine and far faster means of augmenting both of them, and that, as soon as the Japanese lost command of the sea, their sea-girt conquests would be doomed.

Indeed, as soon as the Japanese ceased to dominate the sea and the sky above it, the loss of their new island empire was just as inevitable as the loss of the British, American and Dutch island empires off south-east Asia had been in the opening months of the war. And thenceforward the decisive struggle was the one between Nimitz's naval forces with their attendant infantry and the Japanese opposing them; the operations in the South-West Pacific and Burma became subordinate ones. In other circumstances it would have been a mistake to use more than mere holding forces in the two outlying areas, but the Allies were then so strong that they were able without risk to engage and wear down the enemy with

superior land and air forces in Burma and the South-West Pacific also, without the Central Pacific forces being deprived of anything they needed.

The general shape of the strategy of each contestant in the Pacific war had been foreseen long before that war began and, indeed, had been forecast not only in the secret appreciations of the planning staffs but in books and periodicals that anybody might read. The likelihood that Japan would attack when the British fleets were elsewhere engaged and that Singapore would be taken by the Japanese from the landward side had been the subject of much public discussion. At least from the early 'thirties onwards the Americans had considered measures to defeat a surprise attack on the Hawaiian Islands.¹ And in 1940 Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was seeking from the American Government an air force manned by American volunteers with which to surprise and destroy the Japanese Navy in its bases—a Pearl Harbour in reverse.² Although some pre-war planning had pictured an all-out effort to hold the American colonial empire in the Philippines, responsible American officers had for years urged that the loss of that archipelago should be accepted, and had expressed the opinion that it would be two or three years after the outbreak of war before the American main fleet reached the Far East to fight the decisive battle.

In Australia when the Japanese war began the Ministry led by Mr Curtin had been in power only two months and few of its members had been in office before, but this inexperienced team soon proved that it contained some men of considerable drive and ability. The Ministers were disappointed to find that they were to have little say in the higher direction of the war against Japan. Despite this they not only accepted that decision but supported General MacArthur with undeviating loyalty, not only exerting political pressure in London and Washington on behalf of his command (as could be expected) but giving only qualified support to the Australian Commander-in-Chief, Blamey, when he differed with MacArthur. It is evident that this policy was adopted not merely as a matter of principle but because they had confidence in MacArthur and were greatly taken by his power of impressive and winning speech when in conference—a power which they found somewhat lacking in Blamey, although Blamey's expositions were always lucid and to the point.

Indeed in any consideration of the management of the Australian Army from 1942 to 1945 the temperament of Blamey must be reckoned with. From 1939 onwards in experience of staff and command problems he was seldom inferior and generally superior to his collaterals and seniors in the Middle East and the South-West Pacific. The clarity and wisdom of his appreciations of such problems and the logic and far-sightedness of his strategical thinking have been illustrated throughout this history. Yet

¹ See, for example, M. S. Watson, *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations* (1950), pp. 466-7, a volume in the official series *United States Army in World War II*.

² C. F. Romanus and R. Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission to China* (1953), p. 9, in the U.S. official series.

on his head descended perhaps the strongest vituperation to which any military leader in that war was subjected by people on his own side, and at the end the Government terminated his appointment in a summary fashion.

Some of the reasons for Blamey's lack of popularity with several of the Ministers and part of the public can probably be discovered only by exploring traits in the Australian national character of those days; other reasons are easier to unearth. Throughout the war Blamey commanded an army whose senior appointments were shared between regular and citizen officers. In some places this created tensions and rivalry which adversely affected Blamey's reputation, through no fault of his own; also the ambiguous relationship between his headquarters and MacArthur's led to disagreements of which at least the Ministers were aware. A man of greater tact, however, could have managed these problems more smoothly. But Blamey was not a man of great tact.

When he was appointed to command the A.I.F. in 1939 he was under the shadow of charges made against him when he had been Commissioner of Police in Victoria. These charges had been investigated, with much publicity, and he was in the main exonerated but in the relatively small Australian community and one in which the front-line soldier was regarded with much respect but the general often with suspicion, it was not surprising that rumour should pursue him. If Blamey was to become a popular wartime leader it would have been necessary, from 1939 onwards, for a "public relations" campaign of some skill and persistence to be pursued, and for the man himself to cooperate by taking pains to impress on the politicians, the Press and the citizens that he was not only an efficient commander but an admirable and picturesque person. This Blamey was evidently quite unable to do; indeed some trait in his make-up—it may partly have been a distaste for humbug—led him too often to speak or act with harsh directness. Compromise is one of the essential devices of government, but compromise was not congenial to Blamey.

Some of the origins of an Australian prejudice against generals were shrewdly traced in a paper by A. N. Kemsley, one of Blamey's advisers: the widespread mistrust in Australia of a large organisation—and the army was now the biggest in the land, being bigger even than the "B.H.P." (the steel-manufacturing giant) or "the railways"; the fact that the army contained a proportion of unwilling conscripts whereas the airmen and seamen were volunteers; the awareness that if any force was to be employed in support of the civil power within the national borders it would probably be the army; the widespread conviction in the minds of many people that they could teach the generals how to do their jobs, whereas in the navy and air force there seemed to be technical mysteries baffling to the layman.

Problems of cooperation between allied armies were encountered by Australians in the Middle East, Malaya and the South-West Pacific. Discussion of them necessarily crops up in each volume of this series. It

seems evident that the difficulties that arose could have been foreseen and were not sufficiently discussed between the wars either in Britain or the Dominions—or the United States. However, if answers are wanted to the special problems likely to be faced by the smaller partners in coalition wars it is the business of the smaller partners to find them, because the larger partners are unlikely to be interested until too late.

The Australian Ministers and their senior military advisers seldom influenced Allied strategy and then usually in a negative way, as when they obtained the diversion of the 7th Division from Burma to Australia, which was wise; and the withdrawal of the 9th Division first from Tobruk and then from the Middle East, which can now be seen to have been not strictly necessary. As it turned out the Australian Government was concerned rather with providing—or withholding—forces than with deciding how they were to be employed in the field.

In the matter of providing forces the Ministers and some of their advisers took an unduly long time to realise the basic principle that a nation which desires to possess effective military strength when it is most needed must produce its own military equipment. If it decides to buy or borrow its armaments from another nation it may find that such equipment is not available when most wanted. A nation which is dependent on another nation for basic military equipment is likely to find itself militarily a satellite of that country.

In the first two years of the war of 1939-45 the Australian Government was unwilling to make a maximum military effort on the scale attained in 1916-19 but sought to wage a "war of limited liability"—as some British planners had hoped to do until the setbacks of 1940. The dimensions of the Australian expeditionary forces seem to have been decided more by the rate at which citizens volunteered for service overseas than by the will of the Government, and on two occasions the Government virtually stopped the flow of volunteers into the A.I.F. The threat from Japan produced a change of mood, and the Government then did not hesitate to take stern decisions towards mobilising the full strength of the nation; and for a time it made Australian voices speak rather louder than before in London and Washington. The measures taken at home were perhaps too drastic. Australia in 1942 expanded the army to a size that she was unable to maintain after an exacting campaign in Papua even for a year, and introduced austerities that soon could be seen to be unnecessarily harsh.

For part of the last year of war the Australian Army in the field was larger in proportion to population than that of any of the Allies, except perhaps Russia. The Government's motives in maintaining the national effort at so high a level appear to have been a wish that Australia should pull her full weight, and an ambition to gain international esteem and a position of influence in the peace. It is an illusion to which small nations are prone that the policies of foreign allies, as distinct from those with whom patriotic sentiments are shared, are influenced by such emotions as gratitude for past support.

In the war of 1939-45 as in the war of 1914-18 the Australian Army soon became a force of the highest quality. Armies are not created in a social vacuum but derive their characteristics from the community from which they spring. Thus it was advantageous that the Australian community of 1939 was as homogeneous as that of any of the "new countries". The number of foreign nationals whose loyalties in war might be in conflict with those of the Australians and British-born in Australia was small. At the census of 1933 the two largest alien groups in a total population of 6,629,839 were the Italian (17,658) and Chinese (7,792). Ninety-seven per cent of the people had been born in Australia or the British Isles.

Within this community was an honoured tradition of military efficiency handed down by the men who had fought in the war of 1914-18. "The best fighting force in the fourth year of war was, by general recognition, the Australian Corps," wrote a British military critic.³ "The A.I.F., like all other armies from the British dominions, was found to be among the most effective military forces in the war," wrote its Australian historian.⁴ Anzac Day had become the national day that drew greater throngs than any other observed in Australia.

Restless enterprise and comradeship, both high military virtues, were qualities with which the Australian soldier was richly endowed. His equalitarian outlook lent itself to the development of a stronger team spirit and a more efficient sort of discipline than is likely to be achieved in armies in which there are strict social barriers and a resultant insistence on unthinking obedience.

In the early years of the war the fighting part of the Australian Army was made up entirely of volunteers and in the later years mainly so. The fact that there was always so strong a flow of volunteers was largely a result of factors mentioned above: the homogeneous community, the cherished military tradition and the restless national temperament. A volunteer force, given adequate leadership, is likely to have a stronger pride and to display more enthusiasm, enterprise and fortitude than one compulsorily enlisted.

The gradual and unhurried growth of the Second A.I.F., made possible by Australia's remoteness from the main battlefields, helped the force to maintain specially high standards. The officers of the divisions of volunteers formed in the first two years of war were selected from the large number available in the regular and citizen forces. Those chosen earliest were the first to gain valuable experience and, as has been shown, they ultimately provided most of the senior leaders of the larger army that fought against the Japanese. Wherever they fought in the first two years and a half the Australian divisions, like those of the other Dominions, were formations which, as a result of various processes of selection, were inevitably of higher quality than the Australian Army as a whole, whereas

³ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn From History* (1944), p. 24.

⁴ C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Vol VI, p. 1078.

the armies of their United Kingdom and Indian allies—and later their American allies—had been rapidly expanded, with a consequent dilution of the experienced soldiers and the volunteers.

In general the leaders chosen for the volunteer formations stood the test. Relatively few were relieved of their appointments; this fact combined with the steady reduction in the size of the army after 1942 meant that at senior levels promotion was far slower than in the First A.I.F., or in the British and Canadian Armies in the Second World War. In the British Army, for example, unit commanders of 1940 were commanding corps in 1942; in the Canadian Army an officer who had been a captain when war broke out was a corps commander in 1944. In Australia the reduction of the army from 1943 onwards produced a surplus of capable and tested field commanders, and some military leaders of great capacity were returned to civil life while the war was still being fought.

The Australian military contribution to the defeat of Germany, Italy and Japan was a big one in the years 1941, 1942 and 1943. In the Middle East in 1941 a series of important operations would scarcely have been possible had it not been for the presence there of the Australian corps of three divisions, and in 1942 the 9th Division played a vital part at El Alamein. In 1942, 1943 and early 1944 Australian troops first halted the Japanese and then drove them out of most of the mainland of Australian New Guinea, inflicting on them their biggest reverses on land up to that time. Thereafter the Australian Army was not needed for any major role, but was arduously employed in the series of minor campaigns which it has been the task of this volume to describe. Always a realist and therefore the more keenly aware of the probably doubtful value of the tasks to which he had been relegated, nevertheless the battlewise Australian soldier fought on to the end with much the same devotion and skill that he had shown in the decisive battles of earlier years.