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**AUSTRALIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR IN
EUROPE: A DIM MEMORY OF A DISTANT WAR?**

By

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About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Air Marshal David Evans, a retired Chief of the Air Staff, recently commented:

... Australians are really not aware of the contribution of the RAAF during World War II It irks me to find that everyone that ever sets foot in this country knows about Gallipoli and Tobruk and we have a Prime Minister that makes sure they know about Kokoda. But very few know about the RAAF's contribution - it was really quite massive.¹

These comments drew specific attention to the participation by the RAAF in the war against Germany and Italy and reflect the sense of frustration, shared by many, that the extent of the contribution remains largely unrecognised. Such claims of a national amnesia generally point to the cost in human lives and the extreme dangers faced daily by many aircrews. Remarkably, almost 30 per cent of all Australians killed in action or missing presumed dead during World War II - that is the total for all services and all theatres - were members of the RAAF serving in the air war against Germany and Italy.² The disbelief expressed by many Australians when they are made aware of this is a measure of the lack of awareness of the RAAF's efforts in the war in Europe.

Certainly, people recognise that flying is inherently dangerous, especially in war, but perhaps they do not realise just how pronounced the danger was in the war in Europe. An estimated 27,000 Australians served in the air war against Germany and Italy, less than 3 per cent of the 900,000 Australians who served in the defence forces from 1939 to 1945. These statistics prompt an examination of the claim made by Air Marshal Evans. How could Australians be unaware of wartime operations in which less than three per cent of Australia's service personnel accounted for approximately 30 per cent of those killed in action? Why is the memory so dim? Part of the answer lies in the circumstances surrounding the RAAF participation in the war against Germany and Italy.

THE RAAF CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR AGAINST GERMANY AND ITALY

Australians who participated in the air war against Germany and Italy were under the control of the RAF. There were three ways of doing so. First, several hundred Australians had joined the RAF in the years preceding the outbreak of war because it offered more opportunities to fly a variety of aircraft and because promotion prospects

¹ Evans, Air Marshal D., quoted in *The RAAF in Europe and North Africa 1939 - 1945: The Proceedings of the 1994 RAAF History Conference*, RAAF Air Power Studies Centre, Fairbairn, 1994, pp 13-14.

² Long, G. 'The Final Campaigns', Appendix 7 - *Some Statistics, Battle Casualties - War Against Germany*, p 633, & *All Theatres of War*, p 634. Note: 5,036 RAAF were killed in action or missing presumed dead in the war against Germany (& Italy). A total of 16,820 Australian Service members were killed in action or missing presumed dead in all theatres of war. Therefore, the RAAF proportion of all Australians killed in action or missing presumed dead was 29.9%. RAAF deaths due to all causes calculated as a proportion all Australian Service member deaths due to all causes amount to 18.9%. The prime reason for the reduction of the RAAF rate is the tragic loss of 8,019 members of the Army who died as prisoners of war. The former rate of approximately 30% (29.9%) has been used in the text to illustrate the extreme dangers faced by aircrew in their day-to-day operations.

were better. Despite the obvious benefits of developing the RAAF for the defence of Australia during the 1920s and 1930s, it had been starved of funds and, in 1939, was far from being an effective fighting force.³ At the outbreak of war, it has been claimed that there were as many Australians serving as aircrew in the RAF as in the RAAF.⁴

The second way in which Australians served in the air war was as permanent members of two RAAF squadrons which were placed under temporary control of the RAF. The squadrons were No. 10 Squadron and No. 3 Squadron. No. 10 Squadron happened to be in the United Kingdom taking delivery of new Sunderland flying boats when war was declared. A request from Britain that it remain there to assist in the war effort was approved by the Australian Government. No. 3 Squadron arrived in the Middle East in August 1940 and began operations as an army co-operation squadron. In addition to fighting in Libya, it was involved in the Syrian campaign. The number of Australians who served in these permanent squadrons amounted to a few hundred.

The final manner of service was through the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) in which some 27,000 Australians participated over the duration of the war. This scheme, which is the primary interest of this paper, developed out of a British idea to establish an Empire air force. In this way Britain achieved a considerable increase to its war effort through the selection and training of pilots, navigators and wireless operators-air gunners as well as some groundcrew in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Trainees were employed predominantly in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the Middle East in all three of the RAF's operational commands: Coastal Command, Fighter Command and Bomber Command; as well as tactical air forces operating throughout Europe and the Middle East.⁵

The British war effort was heavily dependent on the trans-Atlantic supply route and Allied shipping losses for the first three years of the war were far too high. In an effort to keep the supply route open, Coastal Command sank 198 U-boats and contributed to the sinking of many more. These results helped clear the way for vital trans-Atlantic support to conduct the Allied invasion of Europe.⁶ Coastal Command also conducted operations against shipping as well as convoy escort, air-sea rescue, aerial reconnaissance (including photographic reconnaissance), and meteorological missions.⁷

Fighter Command's primary responsibility was the air defence of the United Kingdom, its most celebrated achievement being the Battle of Britain in the autumn of 1940. The 37 Australians who participated in this battle did so as members of the RAF, being included in the first category mentioned above. From December 1940, when EATS graduates first arrived in the United Kingdom, members of the RAAF

³ Stephens, A., *Power Plus Attitude: Ideas, Strategy and Doctrine in the Royal Australian Air Force 1921 - 1991*, AGPS Press, Canberra, 1992, pp 48-9.

⁴ Gillison, D., 'Royal Australian Air Force 1939 - 1942', *Australia in the War of 1939 - 1945*, Series 3 (Air), 1962, pp 81-82.

⁵ For Coastal Command see Lax, M., 'The RAAF in Coastal Command 1939-1945'; for Fighter Command and fighter operations see Bennett, J., 'Fighter Operations'; for Bomber Command see Espeland, B., 'Bomber Command: The Australian Contribution', *The RAAF in Europe and North Africa 1939-1945: The Proceedings of the 1994 RAAF History Conference*, RAAF Air Power Studies Centre, Fairbairn, 1994.

⁶ Herington, 'Air Power over Europe 1944-45', p 463.

⁷ Lax, 'The RAAF in Coastal Command 1939 - 1945', pp 78-82.

participated in Fighter Command as well as contributing to fighter operations in the 2nd Tactical Air Force and the Desert Air Force.⁸

Most members of the RAAF became members of Bomber Command, which came to play a key role in the Combined Strategic Bombing Offensive of the last two years of the war. The bombing offensive's aim, established at the Casablanca conference of January 1943, was the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity to resist [was] fatally weakened.

By 1944 Bomber Command had developed the capability to conduct an average of 15,000 sorties per month, dropping 45,000 tons of bombs. In this vital area of air operations, Australians served in five nominal RAAF squadrons, pathfinders and RAF main-force squadrons.⁹

The RAAF contribution to the war in Europe was comparable with that engaged in the war against Japan in its final stages. In May 1945 there were approximately 15,500 members of the RAAF engaged in the war against Germany, 12,300 of them aircrew. Whereas in May 1945 there were a total of 138,000 RAAF personnel engaged in the war in the Pacific area, 14,500 of which were aircrew.¹⁰ Therefore, in terms of the aircrew element of the operational air power capability, the RAAF contribution to the war in Europe was comparable to that engaged in the war against Japan in its final stages.

The importance of the EATS to Britain can be measured by the claim that without it the most hazardous and demanding area of operations - Bomber Command's strategic air war against Germany - would not have been possible. The British official history recorded that the 'Dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand contributed large numbers of splendid aircrews to Bomber Command'. By the first day of 1943, 37 per cent of Bomber Command's pilots came from these three dominions. In the last year of the war the contribution had increased to 46 per cent, with just over half coming from Canada.¹¹ While the British official history records the proportion of dominion pilots, it does not mention how many other members of the aircrew came from the dominions, probably for the reason that it would be too complex to calculate, but there can be no doubt that they constituted a sizeable element. Indeed, without the dominion contribution Bomber Command would have been rendered an ineffective force, unable to cope with the volume of demands of the strategic air war. But there is another dimension which needs emphasis. Due to the appalling attrition rates of aircrew in these strategic air operations, a steady supply of trained aircrew was essential. The ability to augment recruits from the United Kingdom with men from the dominions meant that the supply could be maintained at a satisfactory rate.

Agreement to participate in the EATS was negotiated in Ottawa and ratified in the Riverdale agreement, which had an effective life of three years. In 1943 the agreement was extended, with some amendments, for the duration of the war. Under the terms of

⁸ Bennett, 'Fighter Operations', pp 23-36.

⁹ Herington, 'Air Power over Europe 1944-45', pp 463-464.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p 462.

¹¹ Webster, C. & Frankland, N., 'Endeavour', *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*, Volume II, Part 4, London, 1961, pp 3-4.

the Riverdale agreement, Australia agreed to supply 36 per cent of the total of 28,000 aircrew that would be drawn from the dominions over the initial three years of the agreement. Effectively this was a commitment by Australia to train 432 pilots, 226 observers and 392 wireless operator-air gunners every four weeks, all training costs being borne by the Australian Government. Most of these men would then proceed to Canada for advanced training. Others would undergo advanced training and operational training in the United Kingdom. On the completion of their training all of these men were available for service with the RAF, although they were in the first instance still members of the RAAF. While serving with the RAF, the United Kingdom paid wages and allowances at RAF rates with the Australian Government paying the difference between this and the higher Australian rates. As the historian of the EATS John McCarthy observed:

By the beginning of 1940 the British had solved, at relatively low cost, the immediate problem of finding sufficient aircrew for their expanding air force.¹²

The dedication and the bravery of members of the RAAF who contributed to the war in Europe is above question. Why do Australians have such a poor knowledge of their service?

THE EMPIRE AIR TRAINING SCHEME - SOME IMPERIAL AND NATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Commenting on the EATS, historian John Robertson referred to the ambivalence of the national and imperial priorities which had been a consistent undercurrent in Australian defence developments. According to Robertson: 'The RAAF was the service most seriously affected by Australia's uncertainty as to whether it was primarily part of the British Empire or primarily an independent nation.' 'Among those deciding the RAAF's fate in 1939,' Robertson continued, 'a majority inclined to the former view' Chief among these were Mr Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who was Australian High Commissioner in London and also Australia's representative at the Ottawa conference, Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies,¹³ and Mr Frederick Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence.¹⁴ In addition, John McCarthy explains, as soon as the proposal to establish the EATS had been mooted, 'Bruce in London was told to try and find a suitable RAF officer' to become the Chief of the Air Staff in Australia.¹⁵ This led to the appointment of Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, who assumed his position at the head of the RAAF in February 1940. From this position of power, many claimed that Burnett served British rather than Australian interests. As McCarthy has explained, Burnett described himself as 'Imperialist first and foremost', holding 'firmly to the British vision of an imperial air force crewed by dominion personnel and commanded by career officers of the RAF'.¹⁶ Douglas Gillison, one of the RAAF's official historians, believed that with Burnett directing its affairs 'it seemed likely that [the RAAF's] main task would be to

¹² McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire*, pp 17-22.

¹³ Robertson, *Australia at War*, p 52.

¹⁴ Horner, *High Command*, p 28.

¹⁵ McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire*, p 32.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 33.

train recruits for an English-led force in which there would be only token recognition of Australian national sentiment'.¹⁷

Participation in the EATS led to an inevitable loss of national identity, despite Menzies' comment when announcing Australia's role that the government would 'as far as possible, preserve the Australian character and identity of any air force which goes abroad ... '. But the protection of national interests was always going to be difficult. When Australians volunteered for overseas service in the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) or the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) they were formed into Australian formations and units before embarkation under the leadership of Australian officers, but in the case of the EATS this did not happen. The men went as individuals not as members of an Australian force or even an Australian unit. In no other service was there a degree of surrender of national identity and control on such a scale. It was truly a case of imperial service like no other undertaken by Australia at any time in its history. One senior RAAF officer, Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, subsequently commented disapprovingly that, under the terms of the Riverdale agreement, Australia:

... had contracted to enlist into the Royal Australian Air Force and to train thousands of young men who would then be sent to the United Kingdom - or any other destination where the Royal Air Force was to be found - not as units which could be efficiently administered with complete records of their service, promotions, pay and all those matters which are of importance to the contentment, morale and history of a fighting Service, but to serve in the Royal Air Force on the other side of the world as individuals.¹⁸

While some Australians, such as Williams, viewed this type of service with disdain - Williams considered participation '[f]rom an Australian point of view' to be 'disastrous'¹⁹ - Britain took a different perspective. Intent on winning the war in Europe, the British authorities accepted the trained dominion aircrew and, subsequently, groundcrew as though they were members of the RAF, to be distributed and employed in operational units according to need. From this perspective, the protection of national identity could only be a secondary consideration, a complication which could effectively reduce the combat power of the available force. As Robertson correctly observed, participation in the EATS was, in the first instance, an Australian commitment to imperial rather than national defence requirements.

Despite the essential imperial basis of the Riverdale agreement, some attempt was made to accommodate national sensibilities. Article XV of the agreement made provision for Australia's airmen to be formed into squadrons with Australian identity while they served with the RAF. But the implementation of this provision was still the subject of discussion between Australian and British authorities when Australian trainees began to arrive in the United Kingdom in December 1940. With no specific policy in place for the employment of these trainees, they were naturally sent to units by the British Postings Directorate to fill vacancies wherever they occurred and, at

¹⁷ Gillison, 'Royal Australian Air Force 1939 - 1942', pp 117.

¹⁸ Williams, R., *These Are Facts : The Autobiography of Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams, KBE, CB, DSO*, Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977, p 266.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p 335.

this stage in the war, there was a degree of urgency in mobilising operational units. Furthermore, little pressure came from Australia in the early years of the war to form Australian squadrons. It was reported that Chief of the Air Staff Burnett was 'not quite sure' that 'the identity of Dominion squadrons overseas [was] such a matter of importance as it [was] made out to be'.²⁰ Undoubtedly, Burnett would have believed that control of the RAF was an issue of fundamental importance to the British authorities. As a current senior RAAF officer has recently observed, in view of the level of dominion contribution to the war, it is evident that there was a potential threat to overall British control. If the men from the dominions 'remained in national units, they would soon form national groups, achieve high command, and start to demand a voice in the formation of strategic policy'. It was to avoid such an outcome, that in 1942 Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, opposed any further increase in the proportion of dominion squadrons under his command 'from "every point of view"'.²¹ From this perspective, it was desirable to have the dominion representatives scattered throughout a number of squadrons with established British identity rather than Australian, New Zealand or Canadian identity.

At the lower levels of command, some RAF officers were opposed to the idea of even having complete aircraft crews composed of men from one dominion because they believed they lacked an understanding of the normal requirements of service discipline. One particular practice which was frowned on was the propensity of men from the dominions to seek each other's company in off-duty hours. 'This camaraderie in off-duty hours, regarded as entirely natural by men from the Dominions,' reported John Herington, one of the RAAF's official historians of World War II, 'was considered undesirable by many United Kingdom commanding officers who attempted to segregate officers and sergeants.'²² Therefore, the combination of operational expediency and the reluctance by the British authorities, at various levels of command, to consolidate the dominion contribution meant that Australians were scattered throughout the RAF.

Only 17 Australian squadrons were ever formed under the terms of Article XV of the Riverdale agreement and none of these could be considered entirely Australian. Effectively, only a proportion of the RAAF aircrew in the United Kingdom was serving in these nominal Australian units. By March 1943, after John Curtin's Government had assumed power in Australia and Burnett had been replaced by an Australian officer as Chief of the Air Staff, Australia finally decided that it was in its national interest to attempt to consolidate Australian squadrons as operational requirements would permit. But by that time, RAAF members were scattered among 135 squadrons in Britain alone. For example, Fighter Command held 73 Australian pilots spread over 18 Spitfire squadrons and 13 pilots in 8 Typhoon squadrons. Coastal Command had 20 Australians in 5 Sunderland squadrons, 9 in 4 Beaufort squadrons, 27 in 3 Fortress squadrons and 28 in 3 Hudson squadrons.²³ However, it was Bomber Command where the greatest spread existed, especially for those aircrew who were not pilots. Despite attempts by the Australian authorities to limit the spread

²⁰ Herington, J., 'Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939 - 1943', *Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Series 3 (Air), Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, pp 108-10; R. Williams, *These Are Facts*, pp 267, 269.

²¹ Espeland, 'Bomber Command : The Australian Contribution', pp 44-45.

²² Herington, 'Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939 - 1943', p 115 and footnote 4.

²³ *ibid.*, p 547.

of Australians throughout the RAF, the issue was largely beyond their control and the problem only increased. In 1945, Williams noted that '2,621 RAAF air crew were scattered amongst no less than 214 Royal Air Force squadrons and in no less than 111 instances fewer than 10 Australians were together in a unit'.²⁴

It would be incorrect to conclude that Australia was simply the innocent victim of imperial Britain, an interpretation with some popular appeal. Canada faced similar problems as Australia in representing national interests and establishing national identity within the RAF, but achieved a far greater degree of success. Certainly, Canada had no other war to contend with and so could afford to contribute more of its national effort to the EATS, but Canada also took strong action from the very beginning to assert its national interests.²⁵ Williams drew attention to Canada's success, noting that Canadians had been collocated in stations under Canadian command and a Canadian group had been formed. Furthermore, Williams pointed out that not all nominal Australian squadrons were commanded by RAAF officers. A South African officer commanded one of the RAAF squadrons in the Middle East, a theatre in which both Canadian and South African wings were formed. Nowhere, Williams observed, was any Australian wing formed. Williams blamed the RAF for not having 'the will to fully implement the Empire Air Training Scheme agreement', but had to concede that 'no pressure similar to that by Canada was put on them to do so'.²⁶

Belatedly, the Australian authorities came to realise that they had to do something about representing national interests, simply not for the sake of national pride, but because problems began to arise in providing suitable support for members of the RAAF serving with the RAF.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF OVERSEAS HEADQUARTERS RAAF

There were severe problems in the provision of adequate administrative support for Australians serving with the RAF. Such vital matters as pay, promotion, maintenance of personal records, the supply of uniforms and personal equipment and welfare all suffered. Before the EATS had been brought into operation there had been a proposal to establish an Australian administrative unit in the United Kingdom to take proper care of these important functions. Yet this was not done for a combination of reasons. It was believed by some that Britain could supply these services. Lack of experience and established professional procedures among senior RAAF officers in the early months of the war was another factor. Unnecessary bureaucratic delay also played its part. In effect, Australia had surrendered control of these men to the RAF and had not provided any means to look after their special interests, neglect for which the Australian authorities were entirely blameworthy. At the unit level, it was simply unrealistic for RAF administrative staff to cope with the special demands of the different Australian pay system and to provide Australian uniforms. The members of the RAAF suffered hardship as a result.

²⁴ Williams, *These Are Facts*, pp 335-336; Herington, 'Air Power Over Europe 1944 - 1945', p 17.

²⁵ Herington, 'Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939 - 1943', p 524.

²⁶ Williams, *These Are Facts*, p 336.

The neglect by the Australian authorities created an administrative nightmare made worse by the wide dispersal of the men. Other welfare issues were also overlooked. In the first few years of the war there were no Australian chaplains in Britain. Some personal letters and parcels from home took up to 12 months to be delivered to airmen. Another welfare problem arose in Bournemouth where many Australian airmen, isolated from families and friends, faced up to 3 months delay in a holding unit while awaiting posting to operational units. As the number of these men grew, they became increasingly bored and discontented and morale suffered. When an attempt was finally made to relieve these problems, it was discovered that the Australian Comforts Fund Commissioner in the United Kingdom had never been told that there were any RAAF personnel in Bournemouth. In order to rectify such problems, an organisation known as the Overseas Headquarters RAAF was established in London on 1 December 1941 to look after the interests of Australians.²⁷

It was some time before the Overseas Headquarters could discover the location of all Australians serving in the RAF. They had been posted to RAF units by the British Postings Directorate; the small number of RAAF administrative clerks who had been attached to the British organisation to keep track of Australian postings had been employed on other tasks. The exigencies of the war made it more difficult to locate men because units were changing location, even function, frequently. The problem was difficult enough in the United Kingdom but in the Middle East it took months for the Overseas Headquarters even to establish reliable figures for the number of Australians in the theatre. These belated attempts by Australia to look after the interests of the RAAF members serving in the war in Europe did eventually produce improvements in administrative support for the men, even though a few days after the Overseas Headquarters opened its doors Japan entered the war, placing more immediate demands on the Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne. Yet the dispersal of Australians throughout the RAF, which was perceived as a major problem, was to a large extent beyond control.

HISTORY OF THE EATS - A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

John Herington, pointed to another problem arising out of the dispersal of aircrew throughout the RAF. He recorded that there was 'inevitably an abundance of incidents concerning RAAF aircrew spread over every aspect of air warfare, without a convenient yardstick by which such incidents can be assessed or grouped into a truly representative Australian effort'. When the participation of Australian groundcrew is also considered, Herington concluded that members of the RAAF 'were in so many occupations and locations that it is impossible to distinguish their effort from that of the RAF'.²⁸

There were also problems in ensuring that adequate records were made. One function of the Overseas Headquarters was 'the compilation and maintenance of historical records'. One officer and two airmen were initially employed on this task, but their

²⁷ Mordike, J., 'RAAF Participation in the War in Europe and North Africa: Some Reflections', *The RAAF in Europe and North Africa 1939-1945: The Proceedings of the 1994 RAAF History Conference*, Air Power Studies Centre, Fairbairn, 1994, pp 124-126.

²⁸ Herington, 'Air Power Over Europe 1944 - 1945', p 17.

efforts were soon diverted to the more immediate requirement of publicity rather than record maintenance. The very day after the Overseas Headquarters commenced operations a change in title from 'Historical Records Section' to 'Public Relations Section' was recommended and subsequently approved.²⁹ Any historian who has worked with the war diaries maintained by Australian Army units in two world wars will know that the section had no chance of compiling appropriate historical records in the first place, because of its inadequate staffing level and its location in a headquarters based in London. But it is also apparent that the section was too small and ill-equipped to cope with the demands of public relations. The United Kingdom, for example, had an established Directorate of Public Relations with a staff of 100 officers and 130 civilians. Canada, the other major dominion participant in the EATS, had what Herington called 'a particularly strong team of editors, feature writers, photographers and a film unit in London'. It is little wonder that the Australian section failed to satisfy the demand for their services and, in doing so, ensured the Australian public remained largely unaware of what Australian airmen were doing in the war. Sadly, it was problems like these that establishment of the Overseas Headquarters was supposed to rectify. In August 1941, the Australian Minister for Air, Mr J. McEwen, had pledged that the Headquarters 'would increase the flow of news from the United Kingdom so that the general public was fully acquainted with the activities of the RAAF abroad'. In December of the same year Prime Minister John Curtin felt it necessary to make a special request to the British authorities for more news of significant operational successes. But, in the following March and July, the Australian Air Board was far from satisfied and recorded its 'grave concern' and 'dissatisfaction' with the volume of information emanating from London.³⁰

The problem of identifying the Australian effort in the air war and the paucity of records and information had an inevitable result for historical purposes. Air Marshal Sir Richard Williams observed disapprovingly that the Australian participants did 'not realise that most of their achievements [were] not recorded in Australian history'.³¹ Yet, when examining the relevance of these achievements from a national perspective, it is apparent that another, perhaps more significant, issue needs to be considered.

Towards the end of the war, Herington noted that some Australian airmen who were eligible to return to Australia chose not to do so. The reason was that these men believed that they would be able to find more satisfying service with the RAF in Europe rather than with the RAAF in the Southwest Pacific. Some who had returned to their home country had suffered what they considered to be the indignity of being sent to training units 'to bring them up to Australian standards'. As a result of such actions, there was a general feeling that the RAAF in Australia was not in sympathy with the men who had served in Europe. Adding to this perception, during 1942, acting rank had been taken from returnees, and, as a further affront, a general order had been issued instructing them to remove the badges and stripes from their uniforms which indicated the extent of their European service.³² Don Charlwood, an Australian who wrote of his own experience as a navigator in Bomber Command in his book *No Moon Tonight*, hinted at a probable explanation for this treatment when he observed that 'many crews returning home to Australia from Europe and the Middle East were

²⁹ Herington, 'Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939 - 1943', p 528.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p 528.

³¹ Williams, *These Are Facts*, p 335.

³² Herington, 'Air Power Over Europe 1944 1945', pp 290-291 & footnote 9.

coolly received - as if they had chosen to dodge the war that more closely concerned their own country'.³³ But there is more extreme evidence of such sentiments. In 1944, a London newspaper reported that: 'Australian airmen in Britain have been getting letters from home enclosing white feathers and accusing them of dodging the war by staying in England'.³⁴ Similarly, Herington observed that, with declining opportunities for operational service in the Southwest Pacific after June 1944, '[t]here was a natural tendency [for the RAAF] to give preference to men *who had served faithfully on the home front* and had as yet no opportunity of distinguishing themselves in action'.³⁵

Certainly, in the early months of 1942 many Australians considered that their own country was facing a Japanese invasion. As John McCarthy has pointed out, Australia possessed 'no fighter or bomber aircraft at all and as reconnaissance aircraft only 29 twin-engined Hudsons and 14 Catalina flying boats'.³⁶ During this period Prime Minister Curtin took the step of suspending the dispatch of further drafts of EATS trainees.³⁷ Although the drafts were reinstated some three months later, the singular importance of the European war to Australia was inevitably diminished. It had suddenly become a distant war. The RAN elements in the Mediterranean returned by early 1942 to meet the immediate threat to Australian security and the 6th and 7th AIF Divisions, which had been fighting in the Middle East, did likewise. The 9th AIF Division followed in December 1942. However, for Australia, there was another important dimension to the events surrounding Japan's dramatic entry to the war and its southward thrust. Curtin used the expression 'inexcusable betrayal' in his January 1942 cable to Winston Churchill over the crisis facing Singapore. This angry mood was not confined to the Prime Minister. Sir Ronald Cross, the British High Commissioner to Australia, wrote to Churchill informing him that the fall of Singapore was cause for 'widespread and often bitter abuse of the home country'.³⁸ For many Australians, the moral grounds and sentimental attachment to Britain, which provided the motivation to volunteer for service in the war in Europe, now took second place to the more direct threat to national security, especially since Britain was perceived to have reneged on its long-held commitment to imperial defence.

It is apparent that the men participating in the air war in Europe were to some extent subject to the nationalist sentiment arising from the dramatic change in defence priorities. And, in recent years, as the strength of Australia's former attachment to Britain has all but evaporated, so, it seems, has the relevance of the Australian contribution to the air war in Europe. In 1986 Don Charlwood, who was obviously concerned that '[m]any Australians today are unaware that in the second world war over 9,000 Australians flew on Bomber Command operations from bases in England', inserted an explanatory note at the beginning of his book. 'Our generation - living today as elderly Australians in a multi-cultural society,' he wrote, 'has become something of an anachronism in its own lifetime and *No Moon Tonight* has become a

³³ Charlwood, D., *No Moon Tonight*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1988, p x.

³⁴ Newspaper cutting from unidentified London newspaper supplied by Mr A. Easton DFC of Blackburn North, Victoria. Flight Lieutenant A. Easton was an Australian airman serving in Bomber Command at the time.

³⁵ Herington, 'Air Power Over Europe 1944-1945', p 291, footnote 9. Note: Emphasis added.

³⁶ McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire*, p 62.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p 65.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p 68.

book which calls for explanation.' The point that Charlwood wanted to impress upon his readers was that '[b]etween the two world wars young Australians were brought up with a sense of dual loyalty: to Australia and to the British Empire'.³⁹

SONS OF THE ANZACS

In writing about the Australian participation in the EATS, some commentators have drawn comparisons with the Australian Army. Williams wrote that, in the early months of World War II, '[t]here were strenuous objections to our Army being scattered - why the same principles were not applied to the Air Force I cannot understand ...'.⁴⁰ Douglas Gillison, who was also one of the RAAF's official historians, also compared the RAAF's experience with that of the Army. 'How different was the situation of the Australian Army!', Gillison declared.

By April 1940 it had organised an army corps for overseas service under a commander who had been given wide powers. By August 1941 ... the corps had fought as such in two hard campaigns and its first commander had been promoted to a higher post. But no officer of the RAAF, in a war then two years old, had commanded in action, except briefly, anything larger than a squadron.⁴¹

The commander to whom Gillison referred was, of course, General Sir Thomas Blamey. His original charter as commander of the 2nd AIF opened with the words:

The Australian Imperial Force [is] to be recognised as an Australian Force under its own Commander, who will have direct responsibility to the Commonwealth Government, with the right to communicate direct with that Government. No part of the Force [is] to be detached or employed apart from the main Force without his consent.⁴²

The resolution with which Blamey implemented his charter may be judged by the comments of his chief of staff, Brigadier Sydney Rowell. After one year in the Middle East, Rowell said:

It is not my business to give the Commander bouquets but I think anybody with less force of character and sense of responsibility to the AIF here and to his Government at home would have split the show and we would have a lot of difficulty in restoring it again. But he never ceased to make it clear that he owed his duty to his Government. He made it clear that the British could not simply order Australian units about as they liked. Now they understand us and we understand them.⁴³

In his account of the RAAF's history, Gillison provided some of his thoughts on what the major influences might have been in producing such different outcomes for the RAAF. One reason, he thought, was that as 'the RAAF was a relatively young Service [it] probably made the Australian Government less concerned to preserve its identity

³⁹ Charlwood, *No Moon Tonight*, p ix.

⁴⁰ Williams, *These Are Facts*, p 265.

⁴¹ Gillison, 'Royal Australian Air Force 1939 - 1942', pp 117-118.

⁴² Carlyon, N., *I Remember Blamey*, Sun Papermac, 1981, p 29.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p 19.

than they would have been if similar proposals had been made affecting their army or navy'.⁴⁴ Gillison provided no support for this suggestion but a case can be made that the RAAF does appear to have been at a disadvantage in this regard. Army, for example, had powerful lobbyists who ensured that its independent identity was preserved intact. David Horner points out that Thomas Blamey was concerned for the independence of the AIF in December 1939 and was engaged in correspondence with the retired General Sir Brudenell White on the subject. White, who had been Chief of Staff to the Commander of the AIF in World War I, wrote a draft charter for Blamey. This, Blamey sent to the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General E. K. Squires - a British Army officer, with the comment that although his own experience in these matters was less than White's it 'was sufficient to convince [him] of the necessity of a very firm statement'. Squires did not agree and amended the draft charter. As a result, Blamey then consulted Sir Owen Dixon, a Justice and later Chief Justice of the High Court, for assistance in drafting the charter. Uppermost in Blamey's mind was the need to maintain the AIF as a distinct force and to provide its commander with complete internal control. Squires eventually accepted this charter after discussing it with Sir Brudenell White.⁴⁵

David Horner also provides evidence of other powerful support for the AIF's independence. As early as November 1939, Dr Charles Bean, Australia's official historian of World War I and chief architect of the ANZAC legend, wrote to the Minister for the Army, Brigadier G. A. Street, explaining some of the problems associated with co-operating with the British. According to Bean, soldiers could not serve contentedly under the command of English officers because 'the strong social distinctions assumed in English life are deeply offensive to them'. Nor could they serve efficiently 'because traditional English discipline, based on the suppression of individuality, discourages the most useful qualities of the Australian soldier'. Bean also pointed to another important consideration. 'That in justice to Australians,' he wrote, 'who have grown up with a very distinct outlook, and have many different needs (e.g. as to leave and invaliding) the Government should retain a share in the administration of Australian troops sufficient to ensure that such factors will be fully recognised and Australian wishes respected.' 'In this last resort,' Bean emphasised, 'the Australian Government is always responsible.' In his concluding point, Bean wrote that 'if Australians (or their actions) are to be clubbed with British, some title or term should be chosen to show that Dominion troops are included in the classification'. 'To Australians, rightly or not,' Bean concluded, 'the term 'British' has come to mean 'English' or 'United Kingdom', and the RAF means the air force of the Mother Country.'⁴⁶ This last comment by Bean was almost certainly prompted by Menzies' public announcement of some three weeks earlier that his government had a 'keen interest in the embryonic Empire Air Training Scheme'.⁴⁷

According to David Horner, 'Menzies stated that he agreed with Bean's views'. Therefore, it was 'not surprising' that, in February 1940, the War Cabinet agreed with the charter outlined above, thus presenting Blamey with the basis for preserving the independence of the AIF.⁴⁸ The remarkable feature is that, if Menzies learnt anything

⁴⁴ Gillison, 'Royal Australian Air Force 1939 - 1942', pp 81-82.

⁴⁵ Horner, *High Command*, p 44.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p 45.

⁴⁷ McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire*, p 6.

⁴⁸ Horner, *High Command*, p 45.

from this episode, he applied none of it to the members of the RAAF participating in the EATS. Indeed, had Bean's astute advice been followed for the EATS then virtually all of the problems and misgivings associated with Australia's service with the RAF could have been avoided.

The powerful influence of men like Blamey and White was derived directly from their military service in the 1st AIF. After the first world war ended, they attained prominent positions in Australian society. White became permanent head of the Commonwealth Public Service Board. Blamey became Chief of the Victorian Police Force. Street had also served in the 1st AIF, initially in the rank of private at Gallipoli and rising to the rank of brigade major. He served in the militia after the war, entering parliament in 1934. Men like these could ensure that the Army's interests were given strong support. However, claims have also been made that the Australian Army enjoyed a privileged position in the Australian psyche because of the national preoccupation with the ANZAC legend. Alan Stephens has written that

Charles Bean's success in mythologising Gallipoli, ANZAC and the 'digger' may have helped build a national identity, but it has also placed undue public and political attention on that element of combat power - land forces - which is the least relevant to protecting Australia.⁴⁹

According to Stephens, 'the prevailing public military culture in Australia is overwhelmingly "soldier-centric"'.⁵⁰ If this were the case, then it could provide another reason for the RAAF's contribution to the war in Europe not receiving due recognition.

The Australian film *Sons of the ANZACs* was released as the war was approaching its final year. Produced by the Australian War Memorial, the film was billed as the 'Official Film of Australia's Fighting Forces in Action!'. It was promoted by a placard, which was emblazoned with the coat of arms of Australia and featured a depiction of a soldier, a sailor and an airman, standing proudly in front of an Australian flag. The placard invited the public to 'See these Sons of the ANZACS hitting the enemy in Bardia, Tobruk, Greece, Syria, Malaya, Darwin, Kokoda, Milne Bay, El Alamein, Buna, Bismarck Sea, Lae and Salamaua'. At first glance this might appear to be a balanced attempt to present the Australian public with an account of Australia's three fighting services at war. Indeed, one of the battles featured on the placard - the Battle of the Bismarck Sea - was purely an air operation against a Japanese convoy of ships in the area of the Huon Gulf. Yet the 124 minute film devoted only 2 minutes and 50 seconds to that operation. It might be argued that this is a small allocation of time for an action in which the RAAF played an important part in the planning and preparation stages and in its execution. General Douglas MacArthur described it as 'the decisive aerial engagement' of the war in the Southwest Pacific.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Stephens, A., (ed.), *Defending the Air/Sea Gap: Exploiting Advanced Technology and Disproportionate response to Defend Australia*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1992, p 2.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p 14.

⁵¹ Stephens, A., 'Australia's Forgotten Victory : The Battle of the Bismarck Sea', *The RAAF in the Southwest Pacific 1942-1945 : Proceedings of the 1993 RAAF History Conference 1993*, p 108.

Altogether, the film allocated only about 10 minutes to air operations - Australian, American and British. The only time a RAAF squadron was named was No. 3 Squadron in its support of the Syrian Campaign - 43 seconds duration. The defence of Port Moresby, the battle at Milne Bay and air support for Army operations on the Kokoda Track, all important actions involving the RAAF, received a total of 2 minutes and 24 seconds. Air operations in the Middle East and Syria received a total of less than three minutes. Nowhere is the RAAF contribution to the EATS mentioned. Nowhere is the RAAF contribution to Bomber Command, Fighter Command, Coastal Command and the tactical air forces mentioned. The regrettable result is that of all those operations in which approximately 30 per cent of Australians were killed in action or missing presumed dead - in all services and all theatres - only two, the Syrian Campaign and the Battle of El Alamein, are mentioned in a coverage lasting less than three minutes. But the RAAF was not alone. In the remaining 114 minutes of the film, naval operations - British, Australian and American - received less than seven minutes. This means that 107 minutes of the film *Sons of the ANZACs* - 86 per cent of the available time - was devoted not only to soldiers fighting but also to soldiers being recruited, soldiers marching, soldiers training, soldiers eating, soldiers at the races, soldiers sight-seeing and soldiers swimming. Operations by the Army were given the primary role in the film. Tobruk, for example, was allocated 12 minutes and 45 seconds. The RAN and RAAF were simply portrayed as supporting services.

Before pronouncing a final verdict on the *Sons of the ANZACs*, one further consideration is warranted. The film was produced before the war ended and perhaps footage was not available, especially where it concerned air operations out of bases in the United Kingdom. If this were the case, another film entitled *Sons of the ANZACs 1939 -1945* which was released in 1968 had every opportunity to provide a balanced account of the Australian services at war. Naturally, the new film incorporated much of the footage of the original film but it also introduced more footage to cover the end of the war. Yet, despite the passage of some 25 years and the availability of footage from sources in the United Kingdom and Canada, the same regrettable omissions occurred.⁵² The unstated message is overwhelming: the true inheritors of the ANZAC mantle are soldiers or, to embrace the religious orthodoxy, diggers. Airmen and sailors only stand in the shadow of their image inasmuch as they support the actions of the Army. To sound a more disturbing note, the film promoted the simplistic, and misleading, notion that wars are fought and won by land forces with some support from the other services. There was no recognition that air superiority was vital to the execution of surface operations. The vital strategic roles of navies and air forces were also ignored.

CONCLUSION

Nearly 150,000 Australians were involved in the war against Germany and Italy through operations in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and air operations out of bases in the United Kingdom. Like all major conflicts of the modern era, combat occurred on land, at sea and in the air. Only in this way could the war be won.

⁵² The two films are held in the Research Centre of the Australian War Memorial. F 00188 - 'Sons of the ANZACs'; F 00190 - 'Sons of the ANZACs 1939-45'.

Australians, each one of them a volunteer, were involved in all these environments. On a personal level, their motivation could be attributed to a sentimental attachment to Britain and the moral conviction that a war against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was a just war. However, the threat posed to Australian security with Japan's entry to the war dramatically changed the Australian Government's defence priorities, leading to the withdrawal of the AIF divisions from the Middle East and major fighting units of the RAN from the Mediterranean. Yet, except for a three month period early in 1942, the contribution made by the RAAF through the EATS continued undiminished.

Between 26,000 and 27,000 members of the RAAF served in the RAF during the war, the majority serving in the dangerous and demanding strategic air war against Germany. The remainder were involved in every facet of the air war, including maritime operations, reconnaissance missions and fighter operations. Overall, these men sustained the highest casualty rates by far of any Australian service. Yet, their contribution appears to be little known to Australians today and, indeed, was little understood by Australians at the time. The reasons for this are complex. The argument offered in this paper attributes the national amnesia to a number of causes. Chief among them was the essential imperial structure of the EATS and the lack of will by Australia's political and RAAF leadership to protect national interests. This led to an inevitable loss of national identity and, therefore, difficulty in attributing recognition to RAAF efforts for the purposes of public relations and history. The shortcomings attributed to these initial structural realities were then compounded when Japan entered the war, giving special emphasis to national survival at the expense of the war in Europe. Lastly, the ANZAC legend has predisposed Australian public perceptions towards the war contribution of soldiers at the expense of airmen and sailors.