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The Hard Slog

Australians in the Bougainville Campaign, 1944–45

KARL JAMES

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The island of Bougainville in the South Pacific was the site of one of the largest and most gruelling campaigns fought by Australian forces during the Second World War. During the offensive against the Japanese from November 1944 to August 1945, more than 500 Australians were killed and two Victoria Crosses were awarded. A veteran later described Bougainville as 'one long bloody hard slog'. Despite this, little is known about the campaign, which was dismissed as an unnecessary and costly operation.

In the first major study of the Bougainville campaign since publication of the official history in 1963, Karl James argues that it was in fact a justifiable use of Australia's military resources. He draws on original archival research, including wartime reports and soldiers' letters and diaries, to illustrate the experience of Australian soldiers who fought in the campaign. James shows that it fulfilled the Australian Government's long-standing plans for victory in the Second World War.

Generously illustrated with more than forty photographs, this important book tells the story of a campaign often overlooked or ignored in Australia's military history.

Karl James is Senior Historian in the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

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For my grandparents Doug (N265505) and Coral James,
Tom and Nan (W/193451) McLaughlin,
and their generation who fought the Second World War

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Abbreviations

AAWFA	Australians at War Film Archive
ADC	*aide-de-camp*
AIB	Allied Intelligence Bureau
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ANZAC	Australian New Zealand Army Corps
Arty	artillery
Aust	Australian
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bde	brigade
Bn	battalion
Brig	brigadier
CARO	Central Army Records Office
Comd	commander
Coy	company
CPD	Commonwealth Parliament Debates
Div	division
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
Fwd	Forward
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Inf	infantry
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-Colonel
Maj	Major
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NGIB	New Guinea Infantry Battalion
NLA	National Library of Australia
PIB	Papuan Infantry Battalion
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
SWPA	South West Pacific Area

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I hope this book will not disappoint.

Introduction

On 19 April 1945, 29-year-old Sergeant John Ewen looked at the map on the wall of his weapon pit. His unit, the 61st Battalion, had been in action in southern Bougainville for more than three months. In his journal he confessed to shuddering every time he looked at those dashes on the maps that indicated tracks. They looked so 'cold and matter-of-fact', but they meant more than just lines or features.

> There are two inches of track which I mapped under fire the whole way and which cost 3 of our boys wounded . . . To us it means blood and sweat and days of intense nervous tension . . . Perhaps when years later school-kiddies pick up maps of these islands and find names of roads and hills and rivers such as Blanche's Junction, Holland's Stream and Slater's Knoll [they] may wonder how they were named. How are they to know that somewhere along the road lays the body of the man it's called after. Or that that little blue stream running along over the map once held hidden Jap foxholes in its banks, and out of which a stream of bullets cut the thin line of life of the soldier – who was the first to attempt to cross it.[1]

Ewen's prediction has not come true. Bougainville was one of the largest campaigns fought by Australians during the Second World War. More than 30 000 Australians served on the island, and more than 500 were killed. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded during the campaign. Today, however, few people know that Australians fought on the island during the war, let alone ask about a place called 'Slater's Knoll'. If they were aware of the campaign, it would only be as one of the unnecessary campaigns. When the war came to a sudden end in 1945, Australia had been marginalised from the key battles that would defeat Japan, relegated instead to bypassed areas carrying out 'mopping-up' operations in Australia's Mandated Territory of New Guinea and Bougainville and on Borneo. Although the necessity and the political and strategic

justifications for these campaigns have been passionately debated, the operations themselves have received scant serious attention. Beyond a handful of soldier memoirs, unit histories and specialist publications, there has been little scholarly work since Gavin Long's volume of the official history, *The Final Campaigns* (1963). Twenty years later, journalist Peter Charlton reinvigorated the debate with his provocative book, *The Unnecessary War* (1983), which was highly critical of the campaigns fought in the Mandated Territories. More recently, British war correspondent and historian Sir Max Hastings' sweeping *Nemesis* (2007), on the final year of the war in Pacific, caused a brief uproar when he alleged that Australian forces were 'bludging' in bypassed areas of New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo rather than fighting in more prominent areas.[2] Historian Peter Stanley's excellent *Tarakan* (1997), about the first of the Borneo operations, is the only detailed campaign study of this period. Stanley argued, contrary to popular opinion, that the Borneo operations were a justifiable use of Australia's forces acting as part of an international wartime alliance.[3]

This book uses an approach similar to that of Stanley, to appraise critically the notion that Bougainville was an 'unnecessary' campaign and arguing just the opposite. The campaign fulfilled the government's long-stated policies of maintaining an active military effort and employing Australian forces in Australian territory. Crucially, the campaign was initiated when the Australians mistakenly believed they outnumbered the Japanese and was conducted for the pragmatic reason of freeing the large force from garrisoning the island indefinitely. There were failings and reverses, both on and off the battlefield, but the Australians carried out their tasks with skill and success.

Bougainville was one of the longest and most exhausting campaigns conducted by Australians during the war. It was a slow, gruelling campaign. Lieutenant Colin Salmon, a tank commander from the 2/4th Armoured Regiment, later described the campaign as 'just one hard long bloody slog'.[4] Relieving the Americans in Torokina on Bougainville's west coast in November 1944, Lieutenant-General Stanley Savige's Australian II Corps fought a nine-month campaign to destroy the Japanese, who had been occupying the island since 1942.

The campaign, fought with limited resources, was tightly controlled by Savige, who focused on keeping Australian casualties to a minimum. Savige divided the island into three operational areas: the Central, Northern and Southern Sectors. In the Central Sector, the Australians crossed the rugged mountains to the east coast. Savige used this sector as a

'nursery sector' where inexperienced units were given the opportunity of gaining combat experience – to be 'blooded' – before being deployed to the other, more active areas. In the Northern Sector, the Australians followed the northwest coast towards Buka. Moving on foot and by a series of amphibious landings, the advance went well until a small force was landed at Porton Plantation in June 1945. Suffering heavy casualties, the force was eventually evacuated in what was the only Australian defeat of the campaign.

The main fight was in the Southern Sector as the Australians headed towards Buin, the major Japanese base on the island. The war the infantry knew was one of patrolling along stinking, humid jungle tracks and putrid swamps in an intimate, personal war of section patrols and the occasional company-size attack. The strain of constant clashes with the Japanese and harassing artillery fire eroded the men's morale. 'Strikes' occurred in two Australian battalions as the stress became too much for some. They were soon faced with a greater test. In April 1945 the Japanese launched a major counter-attack. The main blow fell on an Australian battalion dug in around the feature called Slater's Knoll. Although the attack was poorly coordinated, the encircled and outnumbered Australians were hard pressed by the Japanese. The battalion was close to being overrun before the arrival of Australian tanks broke the Japanese attack. With tanks, artillery and air support, the Australians were able to continue the slow advance towards Buin. The Japanese resisted stubbornly, fighting to hold each track and river crossing. They skilfully infiltrated the Australian lines, laying improvised mines and setting ambushes along muddy, corduroyed roads. The Japanese experience of the campaign was one of deprivation, desperation and defeat. In the most extreme instances, a few even resorted to cannibalism.

This book does not attempt to retell a narrative already comprehensively told in Long's official history. This book is an analysis of the campaign that examines why and how it was fought, and it blends the experiences of those who fought it: the officers and soldiers, the Australians and the Japanese. The first chapter is a detailed discussion of the debates surrounding the final campaigns. The remaining chapters follow the campaign's different sectors and phases.

As the person most responsible for the campaign's conduct, General Savige receives the most attention. His career spanned two world wars. He entered the army as a private and retired a lieutenant-general. Brave and personable, he liked a drink and cared about his men's welfare, thus earning himself the nickname 'Uncle Stan'. He could also be moody,

irritable, controlling and paranoid. The commander's role in an action or an operation is very different from the experiences of a soldier. There is a disparity between what commanders, such as Savige, see as they look at a map in a headquarters and what a soldier, such as Sergeant Ewen, sees as he looks over the edge of his weapon pit into an ominous jungle. A close study of personal diaries and documents reveals the pressures and tensions brought about by the varying and at times competing perspectives of senior and more junior officers, and officers and soldiers.

Another theme of this book is the AIF/militia rivalry that characterised the early years of the war. A legacy of the First AIF's achievements in the Great War was the celebration of the superior soldierly abilities of Australian volunteers over conscripted British and American soldiers. Volunteers, it was alleged, enjoyed a stronger *esprit de corps* and would not be reluctant or hesitant in battle. Such sentiments were lauded when the Second AIF was serving in the Middle East, but on its return to Australia in 1942 tensions quickly erupted between the AIF and the militia's conscripts. Discrepancies in pay, conditions of service and prestige exasperated the divisions. Such historians as Mark Johnston have examined the AIF/militia rivalry as it occurred during 1942.[5] There has been a tendency to assume that this rivalry dissipated after the AIF and militia fought alongside each other in Papua. But on Bougainville, the AIF/militia rivalry was ever present, simmering just below the surface ready to ignite.

Uncle Stan

Stanley Savige was no stranger to controversy; he had spent as much time fighting his critics as the Axis. Long thought Savige, in his mid-fifties, with spectacles and an increasing girth, looked more like a businessman than a soldier. Long wrote in his notebook that, while Savige's staff would invariably beat him badly at chequers, he had the 'gift of leadership, knowledge of men, great tact, and much common-sense'. He was loyal, both to his seniors and juniors, and did not believe ill of any unit that ever served under him, even briefly, and regarded any officer or man who had been under his command as one of his family. He received loyalty in return.[6] Savige's most recent biographer, Gavin Keating, described him as one of the last examples of a time when 'senior commanders could rely on personal bravery, leadership skills and "knowledge of men" to be successful'.[7]

Born in country Victoria in 1890, Savige left school when he was 12. He held a variety of casual and labouring jobs before enlisting in the AIF as a private in 1915. He served with the 24th Battalion on Gallipoli where he received a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant. He went on to serve on the Western Front in some of the AIF's bloodiest battles such as Pozières and Second Bullecourt, and was decorated for his good work and devotion to duty. In late 1917, now a captain, he volunteered for special service and was sent to Persia with Dunsterforce in 1918. In an outstanding feat of coolness and bravery, Savige led a small band in an epic rear-guard action that protected a column of 60 000 Armenian and Assyrian Christian refugees fleeing the Turks. Charles Bean considered it 'as fine as any episode known to the present writer in the history of this war'.[8] Savige was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for the action. He wrote a book about his experiences, *Stalky's Forlorn Hope* (1920), after the war.

The Great War provided Stanley Savige with an opportunity for social and professional advancement that would have been unthinkable years earlier. He became a successful businessman and continued soldiering in the militia during the interwar period. His most significant achievement, though, was as one of the founders of Legacy (an organisation dedicated to caring for the widows and dependants of those killed in war) in 1923. During this time, he became close friends with Sir Thomas Blamey, who was then Victorian police commissioner and a senior officer in the militia.

When war was declared in September 1939, Blamey was appointed by the government as the commander of the Second AIF, and he chose Savige to raise and command the 6th Division's 17th Brigade. The 6th Division was riddled with factionalism, infighting and class snobbery among its senior officers. Savige and Brigadier Arthur 'Tubby' Allen, the 16th Brigade's commander, felt on the outer of their brother officers' clique. Fortunately the two liked and admired each other, becoming friends and allies. Differences in educational, social or professional backgrounds can make people super-sensitive to prejudices, and the two brigadiers with their modest origins suffered from this affliction; but it was not unwarranted. Brigadier Edmund 'Ned' Herring, commander of the division's artillery, had a particularly poor opinion of Savige, thinking he had reached his limit as a brigadier.[9]

During the AIF's first action in the war, the 17th Brigade performed unevenly in the Libyan campaign in January 1941. The brigade's advance during the battle for Bardia was described as 'disorganised and tired', and

Savige's ability to cope with the fluid demands of modern warfare was doubted.[10] The remainder of the campaign frustrated and disappointed Savige. His brigade was used piecemeal during the capture of Tobruk later in the month with its units dispersed over a wide area and as a pool of reinforcements for the other brigades. Savige had been promised a more prominent role, but he was continually disappointed. He felt that time and again his brigade was ordered to stop so that others could lead the way. He was a modest man but was proud and super-sensitive.[11] He rightly felt that he was being victimised by the professional officers of the Staff Corps on the division's headquarters' staff.[12] Unhappy, suspicious and increasingly bitter, Savige commanded his brigade in Greece during April, then during the battle for Damour during the Syrian campaign in July. Keating argued that the Greek campaign highlighted Savige's strongest leadership qualities. He was always at the 'hottest spot', one officer recalled, and his personal example and bravery encouraged his soldiers.[13] In late November, Savige was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his part in the Libyan campaign, but he learnt soon afterwards that he was to return to Australia to become Director of Recruiting. Blamey thought that this would be a good way of retiring Savige with honour.[14]

Japan and the Pacific War saved Savige from obscurity, giving him the opportunity to restore his reputation. In January 1942 he was promoted to major-general and became commander of the militia's 3rd Division. He was unimpressed by many of the division's officers. They 'were the type who didn't want to fight', he later commented. 'I was really sick at heart when I saw the unreal outlook & effort which I could only term as "Gathering mushrooms and chasing rabbits". Bullshit, malingering, social ambitions and bugger all in the way of getting on with the job was in full cry.' Savige felt his only solution was to 'sack right & left' and 'obtain AIF people'. He noted there was a 'powerful jealousy towards AIF or anything AIF', but he dismissed this as simply an 'outward sign of inferiority complex'. Savige did, however, believe in the soldiers. 'I found the men & NCOs just the same honest to God blokes we found in the AIF . . . & I have no doubt, we shall get places with them.'[15] This approach proved crucial for improving the quality of the 3rd Division, which was proved during the difficult Salamaua campaign in New Guinea during 1943.

During this campaign an incident occurred that revealed Savige's opinion of himself as well as his strengths and weaknesses as a commander. The commander of a nearby American force approached Savige for

help with supply problems. The American recalled, 'Savige would not talk about supply. He waved his hand airily and said, "I don't worry about supply problems – I leave that to others. I fight battles."'[16] In Savige's mind, a commander trained his men, looked after their welfare and morale, and led them into battle. An author of the official history, David Dexter, considered that this was one of Savige's strengths. 'The sight of the well-loved general toiling along the rugged tracks', Dexter wrote, 'with his pack up and observing the battle area from the forward observation posts gave a great boost to the spirits of the men.' As Savige moved among the troops 'pannikins of tea were offered in such numbers that he could drink no more'.[17] But Savige's was a limited interpretation of generalship.

As the Australian campaign in New Guinea was winding down, in March 1944 Savige was appointed lieutenant-general and the next month became commander of New Guinea Force in Port Moresby. His appointment came at a time when Australian operations had wound down, and it was not anticipated to be a challenging period. This changed unexpectedly in August when Savige learnt that he would command the corps sent to Bougainville. Savige took a tried and tested staff with him to Bougainville. They were the 'others' to whom he left supply problems and the like. This was no accident. Blamey was 'well aware of Savige's military failings . . . and always kept an outstanding staff officer close to him'.[18]

Savige's principal staff officer was Brigadier Ragnar Garrett, a Staff Corps officer. Their association began in April 1941 when Blamey had sent Garrett to act as an operations staff officer for Savige's brigade in Greece.[19] Garrett was the Brigadier General Staff when Savige took over New Guinea Force, and the two worked together closely for the rest of the war. Garrett later told war correspondent and Blamey biographer John Hetherington that Garrett's personal standing with Savige depended on whether or not he agreed with Savige. 'When I agreed I was "Ragnar". When I didn't I became "Garrett".'[20] After the war, Garrett went on to become Chief of the General Staff.

Savige's chief administrative officer was Brigadier Beauchamp 'Roly' Pulver, Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General. Another Staff Corps officer, Pulver had been Savige's original brigade major in the 17th Brigade. Similarly, Savige's artillery commander, Brigadier William Cremor, had commanded the field regiment usually attached to the 17th Brigade in the Middle East. Savige's personal assistant and *aide-de-camp* were also former members of the 17th Brigade.[21]

That Blamey had selected Savige for Bougainville served as a strong indication of how Blamey thought the campaign should be conducted: in slow and tedious advances, with constant patrolling and small-scale actions. Special attention would have to be paid to morale and man management. It was exactly the type of campaign that suited Savige's strengths.

CHAPTER 1

THE UNNECESSARY WAR

We have got to play our part.

Age (Melbourne), 28 June 1944

Conceived and conducted when the war was expected to continue until at least 1946, the aggressive operations fought in New Guinea and Bougainville during 1945 were initiated in order to shorten the campaigns with the ultimate goal of freeing up Australian manpower. They were also fought in accordance with the Australian Government's long-standing desire to see its troops shouldering such a burden of the fighting so as to ensure a favourable post-war position for Australia. Debate and controversy has surrounded these final campaigns ever since the war. In early 1945, for example, the United Australia Party's Senator Hattil Foll claimed that Australian forces were being 'whittled away on a more or less "face-saving" task' in New Guinea and Bougainville.[1] The campaigns were debated in parliament while the press echoed these criticisms. The soldiers had their own opinions, too. Major-General Jack Stevens commented that his veteran 6th Division had not been happy with returning to New Guinea instead of participating in something that would directly contribute to ending the struggle. No one wanted to become any more involved 'than was absolutely necessary'.[2] Sergeant S.E. Benson was more direct, writing bitterly that it had been 'a purely political decision' to fight an aggressive campaign on Bougainville in an obviously 'strategic backwater'.[3]

Veterans, journalists and historians have often repeated this notion that the campaigns in Australia's Mandated Territories were an 'unnecessary war' in which men's lives were wasted needlessly for political rather than any strategic reasons.[4] Some, most notably Charlton, have asserted that the campaigns were fought for the self-aggrandisement of old generals. The eminent historian David Horner, who has published more than anyone else on Australia's wartime strategy and high command, is one of the few people who have argued consistently that on balance the New Guinea and Bougainville offensives were 'probably necessary'.[5]

The controversial commander

The discussion and criticism usually focuses on General (later Field Marshal) Sir Thomas Blamey, charging him with initiating needless offensives against a bypassed and impotent enemy. Blamey is a man who still stirs heated passions. Short and rotund, he wore a short grey-white moustache and was called the 'little (fat) man' by one of his commanders.[6] He was a skilled staff officer with a cutting intellect and forceful personality. He was fiercely loyal to friends and supporters. He was also tactless and attracted controversy. Blamey's military career spanned two world wars, and he is the only Australian to rise to the rank of field marshal.

In 1906, when the Australian army was still in its infancy, Blamey became one of a select few professional officers when he was commissioned as a lieutenant. Completing Staff College, Quetta (then in India), he was sent to London and briefly served in the War Office after war was declared in 1914, before joining the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), which was training in Egypt, as a staff officer. Landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, Blamey went on to serve with distinction during the Great War to become Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash's chief of staff on the Australian Corps in 1918. Monash later described Blamey as having a 'mind cultured far above the average, widely informed, alert and prehensile'.[7]

Blamey left the army in 1925 to become Victorian police commissioner but continued soldiering for most of the interwar period in the Citizen Military Forces, colloquially known as the militia. His time as police commissioner was dogged by scandal. Shortly after he became commissioner in 1925, police raided a brothel and found a man with Blamey's police badge, Badge 80. Privately, Blamey maintained that he had been dining at the Naval and Military Club that night and had lent his key ring, with his badge, to a man visiting Melbourne with whom he had served during the war. Savige, then a major in the militia, had been dining with Blamey and

was willing to confirm the story, but Blamey would not publicly name the man. Blamey instead stated that his badge had been stolen. The scandal eventually petered out but was never completely forgotten.[8] Knighted in 1935, Blamey was forced to resign the following year after lying to protect one of his senior police officers.

When war was declared again in September 1939, the Australian Government decided to raise the Second AIF. The minimum age for volunteers was 20, and they enlisted for service anywhere in Australia or overseas for the war's duration plus 12 months. The AIF remained an all-volunteer force throughout the war. Prime Minister Robert Menzies later wrote that neither he nor anyone in his War Cabinet had 'any doubt' that Blamey was the man to command the AIF.[9] It was his toughness that impressed. 'He will take on anything or anybody', Menzies commented, and Blamey's natural 'power of command' was impossible to mistake.[10] He was not without his flaws. One of Blamey's staunchest supporters described him as 'a great hater'.[11] He also disliked the press and took a belligerent attitude towards it, which did little to enhance his public persona.

His former *aide-de-camp*, Colonel Norman Carlyon, admitted that Blamey 'was a demanding master, he was selfish and he was vain. His mind so flexible and brilliant in dealing with military matters could also refuse to heed the moderating advice of wise friends. He had the ability to be swiftly ruthless in removing subordinates who let him down; but over and above that toughness which every effective general must have, Blamey would sometimes pursue the man who failed or offended with unreasoning vindictiveness.'[12]

Commanding the newly formed 6th Division initially, Blamey subsequently commanded the Australian I Corps (consisting of the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions) after the AIF was expanded in 1940. Sent to the Middle East to complete its training, the AIF became the spearhead of British operations in North Africa and the Mediterranean during 1941, fighting in Libya, Greece and Crete, Syria and Lebanon, and garrisoning the fortress of Tobruk during the great siege. Japan's entry into the war, however, on 7 December 1941, drastically changed Australia's priories. By the end of the month, Blamey and I Corps were recalled from the Middle East to face this new enemy.

Australia's darkest hour

The Japanese rapidly swept through South-East Asia and the Pacific, invading the Netherlands East Indies, the Philippines, New Guinea and

New Britain and capturing Singapore. More than 20 000 Australians from the AIF's 8th Division were captured either on Singapore or trying to make forlorn stands on Ambon, Timor and at Rabaul. Australians were also captured on Java. Only four days after the fall of Singapore, on 19 February 1942, Darwin was bombed for the first time. Australia was menaced with the threat of a Japanese invasion. Although Australians had long feared war, the country was ill-prepared for a war on its doorstep. The RAN was small, and many of its ships were serving outside Australian waters. The RAAF's aircraft were obsolete, and most of its trained aircrew were in the Middle East or Britain. Although I Corps was on its way home (the 9th Division would return a year later), there were few fully trained soldiers in Australia. The defence of Australia rested with the militia.

The militia consisted of conscripts and volunteers, some too young or too old for the AIF. Conditions, entitlements and pay scales varied between the AIF and militia. The AIF received higher rates of pay, which was also tax free, while the militiamen's pay was taxed. Similarly, the militiamen were not credited with deferred pay, and their entitlement to pensions was unclear. The AIF had 'wet' canteens that served alcohol whereas the militia's canteens were 'dry'. Most significantly, the militia could not serve outside Australian territory. Militia units could serve in the Australian territory of Papua, but an act of Parliament was required in 1943 before militia units could serve in the former German colonies of New Guinea and Bougainville. The League of Nations had mandated these former German colonies to Australia after the Great War. The disparity between the AIF and militia effectively created a 'two army' system, causing much tension and hostility between the two. The AIF commonly referred to the militia as 'chocos', short for chocolate soldier – meaning that they looked good in their wrappers but would melt under pressure rather than fight. The militia were also called 'koalas', as koalas could not be shot at or exported. Militiamen retaliated by branding the AIF 'Memas', an acronym for the 'Middle East Mutual Admiration Society'.[13]

During 1942 the pay and service conditions were standardised, and militiamen were able to transfer to the AIF. Members of the AIF were similarly transferred or posted to militia units. When 75 per cent of a militia unit's strength were AIF (or if 65 per cent of its war establishment was AIF) then the unit was reclassified as AIF. These reclassified units received the title '(AIF)'. In 1943 the AIF's age limit was lowered to 18.[14] While the bureaucratic differences between the AIF and militia were gradually eliminated, it took far longer to change cynical attitudes

towards the militia. The AIF's original 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions always remained Australia's preferred sword arm.

I Corps returned quietly to Australia in late March 1942, and Blamey received the news of his appointment as Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces. A fortnight earlier, General Douglas MacArthur and his family arrived in Australia after escaping from the Philippines. 'I have come through', he pledged famously, 'I shall return.' Tall, slim, the son of a Union Civil War hero, MacArthur cut an imposing figure. He was a West Point graduate who was highly decorated and had been the US Army Chief of Staff during the early 1930s. When MacArthur arrived in Australia, he was publicly celebrated as a hero. His arrival and the accompanying promise of American military support meant that Australia would not have to face its darkest hour alone. MacArthur's arrival was a wonderful boost for the country in general and the new Prime Minister, John Curtin, in particular.

MacArthur and Curtin could not have been more different, but they formed a firm bond. When they first met, MacArthur told Curtin: 'We two, you and I, will see this thing through together . . . You take care of the rear and I will handle the front.'[15] This was an agreement that suited both men well. Curtin did not pretend to be military minded. He was content to leave the fighting to those who knew better than he, and he trusted his generals. Curtin, who was also Minister for Defence, had been a journalist and trade unionist, and had been a prominent anti-conscription campaigner during the First World War. He had been Prime Minister for less than six months after the Australian Labor Party came to power in October 1941. Curtin supported MacArthur's appointment as Supreme Commander, South West Pacific Area and assigned Australia's forces to MacArthur's command. Blamey was appointed Commander, Allied Land Forces but had little actual control over American troops.

The South West Pacific Area included Australia, New Guinea, New Britain, the northern Solomons, the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. The directive that established the South West Pacific Area provided for the Combined Chiefs of Staff from the USA and Britain to determine grand strategy, including the allocation of forces. MacArthur received his orders from the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Australia did not have a say in determining the Allies' higher strategy. Curtin's inexperienced government has been criticised for surrendering Australian sovereignty to the USA.[16] But it is difficult to imagine what else could have been done in the circumstances. Australia was not in a strong bargaining position. During 1942 and 1943, Australian troops bore the brunt of the fighting

on land with the AIF and militia fighting side by side in Papua and New Guinea.

The American domination of the South West Pacific Area began with the Allied counter-offensive to encircle and isolate Rabaul. The Japanese developed Rabaul into their main base in the South Pacific after capturing the town and deep harbour in January 1942. From here the Japanese controlled the operations in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Papua and the neighbouring islands. Rather than assault the heavily defended base directly, the US Joint Chiefs decided to isolate Rabaul by capturing and controlling the surrounding islands. The offensive began in June 1943, when the Americans landed on New Georgia: in the following months, Australian troops captured Lae and fought through the Markham Valley and across the Huon Peninsula in New Guinea. The Americans landed on Bougainville before heading to New Britain. By early 1944 Rabaul was finally cut off with the capture of the Admiralty and St Matthias Island chains.

After two years of jungle warfare, the Japanese had been destroyed in Papua and cleared from northeastern New Guinea. But the Australian army was exhausted. In December 1943 Blamey directed that it be 'totally withdrawn' from an operational role in New Guinea. All but two of the six divisions then deployed would return to Australia for training and rehabilitation on the Atherton Tablelands, in southeastern Queensland.[17] MacArthur afterwards stated that it had been the Australian success in Papua 'that turned the tide of battle and on which all future success [had] hinged' while Australia's 'brilliant' campaign helped 'speed the Japanese defeat in New Guinea'.[18]

Juggling Australia's war effort

There was never any doubt that Australia would return to the field; it was only a matter of where, when and in what strength. In November 1943 Curtin told MacArthur that he wanted Australian forces involved in the liberation of Australian territory. Australia 'has a special interest in the employment of its own forces in the operations for the ejectment of the enemy from territory under its administration'.[19] For Curtin it was essential for Australian troops to be used in Australian territory. A month earlier, the War Cabinet had deemed it of 'vital importance' that Australia's role in the future would be enough 'to guarantee us an effective voice in the peace settlement'.[20] Curtin personally reiterated this point to senior political leaders and military commanders in London and

Washington in mid-1944 when he attended the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meeting in London. Curtin realised that while Australia was supplying wheat, meat and textiles to rationed-starved Britain and the American forces in the South West Pacific Area, Australia's post-war influence in the Pacific would be in proportion to the amount of fighting it did.[21]

Curtin's immediate concern was manpower. This dominated the government's decisions on the war effort. From a population of seven million, nearly a million men and women served in the forces during the war; more than 500 000 served overseas. Australian society and industry had also rapidly mobilised for war. There was a tremendous strain on resources. The three services competed for the limited pool of manpower with the industrial sector, which was already struggling to meet the demands of the Australian and American military, and beginning to anticipate peacetime demands. Adding to these pressures was the need to begin preparing for the arrival of a British fleet, which was to arrive in the Pacific and join operations against Japan. Just as the Americans had used Australia for logistic support and as a staging area, so too would the British, although their requirements included base installations, ship repairs, storage, fleet air arm facilities and hospitals across the country. The first British warships were expected in late 1944, and by mid-1945 the planned fleet would include four battleships, ten aircraft carriers and sixteen cruisers. The government's attempt to balance the war effort began in earnest in late 1943 when the War Cabinet decided that the army needed to release 20 000 men by mid-1944. This figure was in addition to those normally discharged for age, discipline or medical reasons. After additional reviews, the War Cabinet decided in August 1944 that another 45 000 men – 30 000 from the army, the rest from the air force – needed to be released by June 1945. The navy's strength was capped at 38 000.[22]

Blamey was very much aware of the government's manpower pressures to release men yet still maintain the army as an offensive force. He had also been anticipating from early 1944 that Australian troops would be used to relieve the American garrisons in the Mandated Territories, which were then held by more than six American divisions. Blamey thought eight militia brigades would be sufficient. Writing on 3 March 1944, he commented to Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead, then commander of New Guinea Force in Port Moresby, that it was 'obvious that the operational role of the Australian Forces in New Guinea itself has practically terminated, and therefore any excessive number retained there will be wasted'.[23]

MacArthur's jungle war

With Rabaul isolated, MacArthur was able to concentrate on liberating the Philippines. During 1944 MacArthur began his 'island-hopping' campaign, which took the Americans into Dutch New Guinea and on to the Netherlands East Indies towards the Philippines. Rather than grinding down the enemy's strength directly, he adopted the strategy of 'island-hopping', making amphibious landings on well-located islands and areas that could be developed into bases to isolate and block the Japanese, leaving them to 'wither on the vine'. This allowed for a speedy advance but also required leaving large troop concentrations in base areas.

On 12 July 1944 MacArthur sent Blamey a memorandum asking for Australian forces to take over 'the continued neutralization of the Japanese in Australian and British territory and Mandates in the Southwest Pacific Area'. The American also mentioned that in 'the advance to the Philippines it is desired to use Australian Ground Forces and it is contemplated employing initially two AIF Divisions'; one division would be used in November 1944 and the other in January 1945.[24] Blamey now only intended to use seven militia brigades in the islands. This would leave I Corps, again consisting of the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions, available for future operations. MacArthur, however, considered seven Australian brigades – about a third of the American forces employed – as 'totally inadequate'. After serious discussions, on 2 August, he issued another directive stating that the minimal force to be employed was four brigades on Bougainville; one brigade distributed among Emirau, Green, Treasury and New Georgia Islands; three brigades to New Britain; and four brigades to the New Guinea mainland. The Australians were to take over the outer islands and New Guinea by October and Bougainville and New Britain by November 1944. At this time the Japanese were thought to have numbered 24 000 around Wewak in New Guinea, 13 400 on Bougainville and 38 000 on New Britain. (Japanese strength was far greater with between 35 000 and 40 000 in New Guinea and about the same on Bougainville. There were nearly 70 000 army and navy personnel plus another 20 000 civilian workers at Rabaul with 12 000 Japanese nearby on New Ireland. These figures did not emerge until after the war.) As an Australian division consisted of three brigades, MacArthur's insistence on deploying the equivalent of four divisions meant that an AIF division had to be used in the islands alongside militia formations.

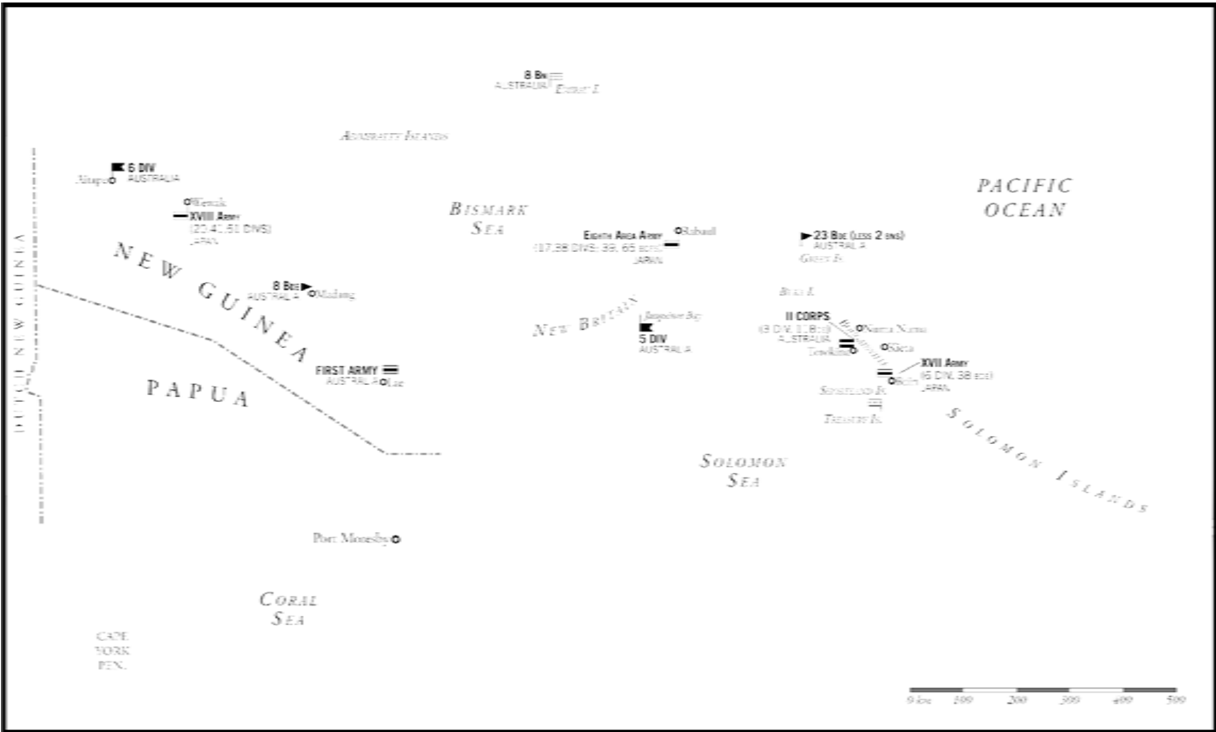
Gavin Long, general editor of the Second World War official histories, argued that the discrepancy in numbers was probably a matter of pride:

MacArthur did not want it recorded that six American divisions were replaced by just six or so Australian brigades.[25] He did not want it shown that Australian troops were capable of the same job as the Americans with only a third of the men. Evidently Blamey was at ease with the comparison. Horner has suggested that MacArthur may have wanted to keep the Australians occupied in New Guinea, thus providing fewer AIF divisions for use in the Philippines or in case a new British command was formed in the South West Pacific Area.[26] Whatever the reason, Blamey could not change the situation. He also had to reduce I Corps from three to two divisions. He was not happy, writing privately to Menzies that the allocation of Australian troops was entirely MacArthur's and that 'I have no real say in the matter beyond carrying out the orders I receive. While I have pretty strong feelings . . . I have no right to criticize them.'[27]

The army's maximum effort

On 11 August Blamey held a conference in Brisbane with the commanders and senior staff officers of New Guinea Force, the Australian First Army and I Corps to discuss the army's future. Issuing instructions for the takeover in the Mandated Territories, Blamey considered that this next phase of operations would mark the army's 'maximum effort' of the war. The headquarters of Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee's First Army would move from the Atherton Tableland to Lae, in New Guinea, to replace New Guinea Force and become responsible for all operations in New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomon Islands. From New Guinea Force's staff, Savige – who had replaced Morshead as commander of New Guinea Force in April with Morshead taking over I Corps – would form the headquarters of the Australian II Corps for the operations in the Solomons. The 3rd Division and 11th Brigade would be sent to Bougainville while the 23rd Brigade would be deployed on Green and the other islands. Savige thus had a corps command of nearly two divisions. The 5th Division would take over responsibility for New Britain while the 8th Brigade would continue garrisoning the Madang area in New Guinea. These militia formations were already serving in New Guinea. To fulfil MacArthur's requirements, Blamey chose the 6th Division to relieve the American forces at Aitape on New Guinea's north coast. It was the only AIF division at full strength and ready for immediate deployment.[28]

Blamey attended the Advisory War Council (consisting of four members of the War Cabinet as well as three members of the Opposition) on 7 September to inform them of MacArthur's decision that Australian



Map I First Army Area of Operations