



MacArthur's Coalition: US and Australian Military Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area, 1942–1945 by Peter J. Dean.

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In this, his sixth work on Australia during World War II,¹ historian Peter Dean (Univ. of Western Australia) provides a balanced account of the evolving relationship between Australia and the United States in the Pacific theater. As its title indicates, the book chiefly concerns Gen. Douglas MacArthur's marshaling of American and Australian forces for the defense of Australia and then the seizure of the initiative from Japan. "What emerges is a coalition that is fundamentally ad hoc, profoundly asymmetrical, and deeply dominated by its US Army commander in chief ... General MacArthur" (5). This asymmetry reflected the Roosevelt administration's "Germany First" policy and the secondary status given by the US Joint Chiefs Staff (JCS) to the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) within the Pacific Ocean Areas command under Adm. Chester Nimitz. This order of priorities forced MacArthur to negotiate constantly with his superiors for manpower and material, but left him broad discretion in using what he was given. Hence, MacArthur's coalition was less an alliance of two nations than of a powerful American military commander and a nation compelled by circumstance to embrace whomever the United States sent it (43).

MacArthur's Coalition comprises an introduction, thirteen chapters, and a conclusion. It also features forty-one illustrations, including organizational charts and high-quality maps, a long list of abbreviations, sixty-one pages of notes, a select bibliography, and a well-crafted index. Dean draws on primary sources in American and Australian archives as well as relevant secondary literature to produce an unprecedented, thorough assessment of the efficacy of the coalition as a combined military force.

The author maintains that the US-Australian partnership was above all a successful military enterprise. Despite the discords that typify all military alliances—as well as those peculiar to MacArthur and his Australian charges—the alliance was "ultimately successful in providing for the security of Australia, its development as a major Allied base for operations, and the total defeat of the Japanese in the theater of operations" (372).

In his introduction, Dean stresses that his research reveals a hastily improvised response to the initial disasters of the Pacific War, notably MacArthur's defeat by the Japanese in the Philippines. President Roosevelt's awarding of the Medal of Honor to MacArthur after the general had escaped to Australia, leaving seventy-six thousand of his men in captivity, was the act of an administration desperate for heroes. The same may be said of the celebration by the Australian government and press of MacArthur at a moment when his heroism was still largely theoretical:

1. The others are *The Architect of Victory: The Military Career of Lieutenant-General Sir Frank Horton Berryman* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011); *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War* (id., 2013); *Australia 1943: The Liberation of New Guinea* (id., 2014); *Australia 1944-45: Victory in the Pacific* (id., 2016), and *Australia's American Alliance* (Melbourne: Melbourne U Pr, 2016).

The Sydney Newspaper the *Sun* argued that “no war leader has yet made a more decisive impact upon the imagination of the English-speaking world than General Douglas MacArthur.” Such praise went way over the top, and it drove senior American officials to consider how much this rapturous welcome was actually a reflection of anxiety in Australia over its wartime management. (45-46)

To make more than an imaginary impact on the Japanese army, MacArthur had to cooperate with his Australian hosts in Canberra while pressing the JCS in Washington for the resources needed to contain Japanese offensives and generate some offensive initiative as early as possible. The military-to-military relationship between the United States and Australia in the SWPA evolved quickly from the travails of 1942 (the so-called “Battle of Brisbane” riots and the very real battles of Buna-Gona and Sanananda) to the revamping of command structures to conform with strategic thinking in 1943, to operational and tactical collaboration in the New Guinea campaign of that year and the steady growth of American dominance in the partnership, and, finally, the erosion of cooperation by high commanders under the pressure of divergent priorities in 1944.

Since the Australian commander in chief, Gen. Thomas Blamey, chafed at MacArthur’s overbearing self-regard,

the ability of formation and unity commanders and their senior staff officers, from both nations, to develop strong personal relationships to overcome many of these differences and to get the job done was paramount. This approach, as the Papua campaign would prove, was much more easily accomplished the farther US and Australian officers were away from GHQ and the closer they got to the front lines. (101)

Dean’s treatment of command, operations, and tactics demonstrates that performance in combined operations improved dramatically at the coalition’s cutting edge—contact with an able adversary fostered sober pragmatism in all things. Nonetheless, conflicts in the upper reaches of authority could not be papered over. Moreover, MacArthur’s lack of resources in the SWPA meant he often had to fight large-scale land campaigns in a maritime environment, with the result that progress was slow and casualties high (168–202).

A case in point is the amphibious assault on Finschhafen during the liberation of New Guinea (Operation Cartwheel). A hastily planned operation based on uncertain intelligence on the strength and intentions of Japanese troops in the area resulted in poor coordination of the supply and reinforcement of Australian troops committed against them. When advised of the need to bolster the Australian position, MacArthur responded that moving troops to Finschhafen would compromise the timetable for Cartwheel. In short, he was putting future operations ahead of the present grim tactical realities facing Australian troops already engaged.

It is clear that the commander ultimately responsible for the calamity was MacArthur. It was his faulty command system in the SWPA that had created the vacuum for this situation to develop. If a proper joint commander had been appointed with the authority to make timely decisions, this situation would never have occurred. Instead, MacArthur insisted on remaining the sole joint commander and refused to delegate this responsibility. He soon left the battlefield to run his theater and turned his attention to strategic issues, abandoning his operational commanders and leaving them with contradictory orders and no local authority to resolve them. It was his insistence on the top-down, centralized control of all operations and cooperative command that was the major culprit. It was not the first time this had happened in the SWPA, and it would not be the last. (319–20)

Nevertheless, the liberation of New Guinea was one of the most fruitful coalition enterprises of the Pacific War: American and Australian forces on the ground successfully coordinated their efforts, and their naval and air support was outstanding. But this campaign marked the sunset of

Australia's influence within the SWPA. The country was now facing a manpower crisis after more than four years of fighting, just as the full weight of American military might was being brought to bear in the Western Pacific. By late 1943,

MacArthur became ever more focused on accumulating US combat power to "fulfill his destiny" to liberate the Philippines. Increasingly, he was able to put in place his long-held ambition to directly command the ground forces in his theater, focused almost exclusively on the US Army. The Australians, who had laid the foundations for MacArthur's victories, would increasingly become marginalized. (329)

Australia's devaluation as the war's endgame turned north toward Japan in 1944-45 was inevitable. In the earlier rapidly changing circumstances of the war, MacArthur had always made it clear that America's coalition with Australia was a matter of temporary strategic convenience and that he alone would direct its joint endeavors. Any other American military commander would have done the same, and in any case, Dean observes, "most of the problems that were encountered early in the relationship emanated from differences in culture, doctrine, and experience and the pressures felt in the face of the enemy as the forces in the SWPA battled for survival and then fought to gain the upper hand over the Japanese" (397).

As Peter Dean so persuasively argues in his authoritative, instructive, and discerning new study, whatever MacArthur's faults, it was an Australian delusion to think that things could ever have been otherwise.