

# Yanks down under - 'Over-sexed, over-paid and over here'

Almost 1 million American service personnel, including about 100,000 African-Americans, passed through Australia during World War II. American troops started arriving in Australia in December 1941 and during the next four years they became a continuous presence in Australian life, opening major cities to a new culture and making a substantial impact on the local economy.

At first they were welcomed as saviours but as time went on the glamour of their presence wore off. Australians became a little more critical of American ways even though the importance of the American alliance was never in question. American servicemen and women set up enclaves of American culture with soda fountains and their own clubs where they could eat their own American-style meals. They were better paid and had access to more exotic consumer items in their military PXs (tax free stores) and many Australian women saw the well-paid Americans as desirable and romantic. More than 12,000 Australian women became American war brides, most of whom returned to the US with their new husbands at the end of the war.

The American servicemen and women were camped or billeted in major cities as they trained or prepared to be sent to the Pacific front. Many were stationed in northern Australia – in Townsville, Cairns, Brisbane, Rockhampton – and others returned from the front for rest and recreation or to convalescence in Australia.

The Australian Government, lacking confidence in Australia's capability to defend itself, had expressed its willingness to accept a supreme commander in the south-west Pacific - initially - from either Great Britain or the United States. Although MacArthur's appointment had been discussed for some time, it was only confirmed after the devastating loss of the Philippines to the Japanese. Australia's security became a vital link in the future American offensive against Japan, providing a base from which they could fight the Pacific war. From the Australian perspective, the US offered the opportunity for strategic protection as well as the acquisition of weapons and personnel with which to fight the Japanese.

In March 1942, General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific Area, arrived in Australia from the Philippines. He travelled by train to Melbourne where he was met by a large group of federal ministers and senior Defence Force officers as well as enthusiastic crowds lining the streets. The Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, quickly established a new link between the government and MacArthur: the War Conference. There were just three members, himself, General MacArthur and the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Frederick Shedden. The military and political implications of MacArthur's command of Australian forces were and are still today a matter of controversy.

On the Australian home front, the presence of so many American troops caused a huge boost in rural production as rural industries rushed to keep up with the new levels of demand for food supplies. The troops needed entertainment as well as food, and in towns and cities, opening hours of hotels, clubs and restaurants became more liberal to accommodate them. There was also some

rivalry and a number of clashes between Australians and the better paid American troops. Most publicised was the 'Battle of Brisbane' which took place on 26 November 1942. Although this large-scale riot was essentially between Australian and US servicemen it was believed to have been started after provocation by the US military police of one of their own countrymen. The clash resulted in the death of one Australian soldier and serious injuries to several Australian and American soldiers.

The arrival of black African-American troops caused another impact on the Australian home front. Despite the discrimination they suffered in the US, they demonstrated the possibility of greater political and economic opportunities that were available to black Americans. Indigenous Australians, who had been largely excluded from the Australian forces, were influenced by the possibilities they seemed to offer.

Although by the middle of 1943 it was clear that Australia was no longer under threat of a Japanese invasion, there were other perceived advantages from continuing military operations with the Americans. It was hoped that there would be both economic and diplomatic advantages if Australia could be involved during future peace treaty negotiations.

After World War II, Britain reasserted some of its lost dominance in the south-west Pacific. However, British power was clearly on the wane and the American alliance, forged in the dark days of 1942, has remained of central importance to Australia to the present day.

## **Australia turns to America**

During the final days of December 1941, the newly appointed Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, was approached to provide a New Year message to be published in the Melbourne *Herald*. Amongst his controversial statements to the Australian people was the oft-quoted sentence:

'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I made it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.'

Curtin's suggestion that Australia should play a role with the United States in determining Pacific strategy upset both the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, as well as many Australian conservatives.

Once the Philippines fell to Japanese troops, Roosevelt decided that Australia would become the main American base in the south-west Pacific. Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur, former US commander in the Philippines, to travel to Melbourne to take command of the Allied forces in the area. Although Curtin was keen to share the military burden with the new Commander-in-Chief, South-West Pacific Area, he would not relinquish his government's control of the disposition of Australian forces. He also established the Prime Minister's War Conference to be a link between the Australian Government and MacArthur. The Conference members included MacArthur and Curtin and any other ministers deemed necessary for a particular discussion.

By early 1942, over 25,000 US troops unable to travel on to the Philippines had already arrived in Australia. Australians rallied to welcome their Allies, with the country providing food and accommodation as well as airfields and other resources for the increasing numbers of American service personnel arriving in the country.