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In My View: Prestige and Participation

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IN MY VIEW

PRESTIGE AND PARTICIPATION

Sir:

To the section “The Pacific War,” pages 24–25, in Peter J. Dean’s Autumn 2014 article in this journal, “Amphibious Operations and the Evolution of Australian Defense Policy,” could be added discussion of the 1945 Australian operation against previously bypassed Japanese-held areas and Australian operations against Dutch Borneo. These operations were conceived, developed, and implemented because of Australian domestic political and economic factors, the ambition of Australian general Thomas Blamey and others who would execute these operations, and long-range postwar political and diplomatic objectives. These operations were opposed by General Douglas MacArthur.

The Australian people wanted their troops used in combat in 1945 or demobilized for civilian work. Anticipating these operations, Australian prime minister John Curtin informed British prime minister Winston Churchill on 8 October 1943 (quoting hereafter from my article in the January 1985 Military Affairs), “The Government [of Australia] considers it to be a matter of vital importance . . . that her military effort should be concentrated as much as possible in the Pacific and that it should be on a scale to guarantee her an effective voice in the peace settlement.” In June 1945, answering criticism of the use of Australian forces to liquidate previously bypassed Japanese-held areas, Prime Minister [Ben] Chifley explained, ‘From the aspect of prestige and participation in the Pacific peace settlement, it is of great imperative [sic] to Australia to be associated with the drive to defeat Japan.’ At the San Francisco Conference a few weeks later, the Australian representatives stressed that the war effort that Australia has made and intends to continue until Japan is defeated entitles us to a special consideration of our views on and our part in the final Pacific settlement.’

[paragraph omitted]

“Prime Minister Curtin told his House of Representatives [on 24 April 1945] the Australian government 'considered it was both logical and appropriate that
Australian forces should take over the islands which formed our outer screen of defence and which were mostly our own territory. And he went on: ‘The Government accepts full responsibility for the operations that are being carried out.’ The Australian general in charge, Blamey, kept MacArthur informed of those operations, but MacArthur, of course, gave ‘no specific instructions’ regarding them. The local commander in these operations had ‘considerable freedom of action as to methods to be employed.’ The Australian commanders involved chose ‘to carry out active operations in effecting neutralization where other commanders might decide on more passive measures.’

“When Curtin asked MacArthur his opinion of Blamey’s proposal ‘to attack the Japanese instead of using passive defense measures,’ MacArthur told Curtin that ‘the tactics of the problem naturally were a responsibility of the local commander,’ but that he ‘was in disapproval of the method suggested as being unnecessary and wasteful of lives and resources.’ MacArthur ‘advised him [Curtin] strongly not to permit the tactical program suggested by General Blamey.’ Charges were raised in the Australian press that these Australian operations were not adequately equipped, supplied, and supported. These criticisms were not attacks upon MacArthur, since they concerned ‘the adequacy of Australian equipment and procedures,’ which were matters beyond the scope of MacArthur’s authority. And upon investigation, the charges were revealed to have been unfounded.”

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