

## **Prime Minister Curtin, Mount Ainslie and a firm decision – February 1942**

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Recently, while standing on the steps of Old Parliament House and looking towards Mount Ainslie in a contemplative mood I was reminded of another pair of eyes who, in the summer sixty-three years ago were most likely doing just the same thing. This other pair of eyes, however, would have reflected a deeply troubled mind and an equally troubled heart. They belonged to Prime Minister John Curtin and he was just about to make a very important decision, ultimately for the benefit of his country.



John Curtin, Prime Minister of Australia 1941-1945

In the early weeks of 1942 Australians faced the dark thoughts of a Japanese invasion<sup>1</sup>. Its best-trained and experienced troops, the Second AIF, had for the most part of the existing war been assisting Britain safe guard its holdings in North Africa, the Mediterranean and Europe from the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Vichy France. In southeast Asia, Australia had another division protecting the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. In the Pacific the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour and were making speedy advances on the Philippine, Malay and Singapore. And on February 19<sup>th</sup> Darwin was bombed. All that stood before them and the coast of Australia was the newly formed militia force in New Guinea.

Curtin's close adviser and head of the Defence Department, Fredrick Sheddon, had earlier informed Curtin that that there was not a single division in the country capable of repelling an invasion. Curtin was extremely concerned about the capability of these troops in New Guinea (the men of the AIF disparagingly referred to the militia forces as "Chocos" – Chocolate Soldiers who would melt when the heat was applied). They had been hastily trained and inadequately equipped to meet the threat from Japan. Sheddon further advised Curtin that the Australian Government would have to place its faith in Singapore's ability to withstand an attack. Singapore, as a fortress in the east, had been the mainstay of Australia's interwar defence policy. But on February 15<sup>th</sup> Singapore fell to the Japanese invasion and Darwin was bombed four days later. Curtin wanted his trained and seasoned soldiers back home to defend

Australia. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had other ideas. He wanted the AIF to bolster the British contingents in the defence of Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). His main interest was to halt the Japanese before they reached the Burma Road on which supplies were carried from India to China. Keeping China in the war and supplied would force the Japanese to commit more troops to this theatre and prevent them from taking India, the Jewel in the Crown of a now faltering British Empire.

The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the AIF had been relieved at Tobruk and in early February were on board troop carriers in the Indian Ocean on their way to Java (Indonesia). The 9<sup>th</sup> Division remained in the Mediterranean and were later to play an important role in the Allied victory at El Alamein. Curtin wanted the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions diverted to Australia. A series of stern cables were being passed between he and Churchill, with the Australian Prime Minister digging in his heels over what he saw as the need to defend the Australian homeland. Churchill's return cables were equally strong and forceful. Neither would give way. Churchill called upon Australia's representative in London, Earl Page, to try and dissuade Curtin from bringing the AIF home. Page had indeed tried to convince Curtin of the importance of defending Australia by sending troops to Burma. This, Page argued, would play an important role in keeping China in the war. Churchill had also asked the United States President, Roosevelt, to contact Curtin and convince him of the perceived error of his ways but the Australian Prime Minister was made of sterner stuff than any of them thought.

Curtin did not wish to expend more Australian lives in far away places while there was an impending threat at home. He had to make a decision to over-ride the British Prime Minister, something that no other Australian Prime Minister had done before. He required time to think. The decision to be made may well alter the course of the war (in the Pacific at least); it may even change the outcome of the war; and it would certainly change the relationship between the British and Australian governments. Curtin was already at odds with Churchill. In the last days of 1941 Curtin had declared that 'without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'.

A long walk with his own thoughts and conscience was what he needed. So in the late afternoon of the 21<sup>st</sup> February he took himself towards Mount Ainslie for a long contemplative stroll. He was away for so long in fact that Fredrick Shedden became deeply concerned about his disappearance especially as nightfall came. Shedden even organised for messages to be put up on the screens of the city theatres asking that the Prime Minister return to his office or at least contact it urgently. One can only wonder what the cinema patrons thought of that! Curtin did of course return and he had made up his mind what he was going to do. He was not going to be swayed by Churchill, the US President or any one else. He had to think of Australia first. The troops were to come home to Australia!

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February Curtin still trying to observe diplomacy cabled Churchill: '... our wishes in regard to the disposition of the AIF in the Pacific theatre have long been known to you.' Churchill replied bombastically: 'We could not contemplate that you would refuse our request, and that of the President'.

Churchill, forever with some more tricks up his sleeve, had already ordered the troop ships carrying the two Australian divisions to change course and head to Burma. He did not inform Curtin of this decision until 24 hours later! The troop ships by now had not enough fuel to reach Australia and would have to stop for 3 to 4 days in Colombo to refuel. Churchill suggested that this was a time for Curtin to rethink. When he was eventually informed Curtin was shocked and angry that the relationship between the British and Australian leaders had come to such a state as this. Since Federation there had been a close association between the two heads of office, with Australia always ready to rush to Britain's aid in time of a crisis. Curtin needed no more time to rethink. In making his final decision Curtin would also have thought about the commitments Australia had made in the South African War and the immense loss of life and horrific injuries Australians had suffered in World War I protecting Britain's interests far away from home.

From Parliament House (now Old Parliament House) Curtin, with the backing of his War Cabinet, wrote a final uncompromising cable to Churchill:

*Australia's outer defences are now quickly vanishing and our vulnerability is completely exposed.*

*With AIF troops we sought to save Malaya and Singapore, falling back on the Netherlands East Indies. All these northern defences are gone or going. Now you contemplate using the AIF to save Burma. All this has been done, as in Greece, without adequate air support.*

*We feel a primary obligation to save Australia not only for itself but to preserve it as a base for the development of the war against Japan. In the circumstances it is quite impossible to reverse a decision, which we have affirmed and re-affirmed.*

The Greek campaign, which Curtin referred to, had been particularly irksome and troublesome for him. Churchill had thrust it upon his predecessor, Menzies, through some slick diplomatic duplicity. Churchill had independently convinced both Menzies and his Army Chief, General Blamey, that each were in favour of the campaign and had given approval for Australian troops to participate. Neither was actually convinced. Menzies and Blamey, for some reason, had failed to consult each other directly over the proposed campaign and both took Churchill at his word. It had been a total failure and had cost about 8,000 Australian casualties.

Churchill had little choice but to finally concede. The troops came home safely, albeit for some, for a short time. Units were soon sent to New Guinea to fight the advancing Japanese. The veterans of the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 7<sup>th</sup> Division were the soldiers who, along with the 39<sup>th</sup> Militia Division "Chocos", later to be known as "those ragged bloody heroes" but officially known as Maroubra Force, fought an intense delaying action along the terrible Kokoda Track eventually forcing the Japanese to abandon their thrust to Port Moresby and retire back to the north coast of New Guinea. But justification for Curtin's decision to bring the troops home came before the Kokoda campaign. Rangoon fell to the Japanese forces on 8<sup>th</sup> March and it is doubtful as to whether the Australian divisions could have averted its fate. The troops of the 6<sup>th</sup>

and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions, or those that would have survived the fighting may well have ended up as more prisoners of war, lost to Australia.

Curtin's crucial decision to bring the two AIF divisions home, finally resolved while he was walking the slopes of Mount Ainslie on that warm summer evening in February 1942, was ultimately the right one to make.

Curtin did not see the war out. He was ill even while arguing with Churchill. He had suffered many sleepless nights worrying over the safety of the troops while at sea and the toll of the war was to weigh heavily upon him. After a further long period of declining health and hospitalisation he died on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1945, just six weeks before victory in the Pacific.

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<sup>i</sup> Contrary to public opinion at the time, and indeed to this day, the Japanese government had no intention of invading Australia. Their policy was rather to isolate Australia from the northern Pacific by occupying Papua and deny the Allies its use as an effective military base (which it did become). The myth of a Japanese invasion during World War II has been regularly been perpetuated by certain writers wishing to create a historical fact which never existed.