



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



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Australia's involvement in World War Two (WWII) is often solely attributed to its relationship with Britain. However, this assumption fails to recognise other contributing factors. While Australia's initial involvement in the European theatre was motivated by its British ties, Australia's contributions in the Pacific region were driven by concerns for its national security. Additionally, it is important to consider the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Australians and their unique motivations. Thus, the belief that Australia entered WWII purely due to its British relations is an oversimplification that fails to capture the complexity of Australia and her peoples, making the statement's accuracy limited.

Australia's long-standing ties with Britain were a major influence in the country's decision to join WWII. As a former British colony and member of the Commonwealth, Australia had an extremely close relationship with Britain. In fact, until the Australian Citizenship Act of 1948, Australians were classified as British citizens and commonly referred to Britain as the "mother country" (Grant, 2014). These factors led to an integration of British and Australian identities. Notably, this bond extended into the countries' defence forces, with Australian and British militaries closely aligning before WWII. Many of Australia's influential military leaders, such as Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey – a key contributor to Australia's military achievements in WWII – were trained in Britain (Australian War Memorial, 2024). As a result, Australia's defence tactics and structure were heavily modelled after the British military (Rayment, 2024). This commonality fostered unity and linked British values to Australia, creating an unspoken expectation that Australia would support Britain during conflicts. Australia consequently became part of Britain's larger global defence network and Australia's involvement in major conflicts, such as World War One, reinforced the Australian-British relationship (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). This alliance created a tradition of military cooperation and established a framework that heavily influenced Australia's decisions. This was evident in Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies's address to the nation on the 3rd of September 1939 – the same day Britain declared war on Germany. In his announcement, he stated that "*Great Britain has declared war upon [Germany], and that, as a result, Australia is also at war*" (Menzies, 1939). This declaration of war was met with little opposition in Parliament and received widespread

acceptance from the Australian public (National Library of Australia, n.d.). In hindsight, a declaration of war on a nation that is 15,000km away while under no direct duress seems excessive. However, the Australians of the time felt it was their moral obligation to do so, illustrating the powerful influence Britain had on Australia's initial involvement (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2024). Moreover, Russell Braddon, an Australian WWII soldier, personally recounted that "[he] joined the Army because the King was in danger and the Empire was in danger... it's as simple as that" (Keneally, 2014, p.141). This sentiment was prevalent among Australian soldiers, reflecting the widespread belief that Australia's participation was essential to the defence of the British Empire (*Shifting Tides*, 2020). Through this examination of the relationship between Australia and Britain, the assumption that Australia joined the war due to its ties with Britain is partially supported.

However, as the war progressed, Australia's motivations shifted significantly in response to more immediate threats to its national security in the Pacific region. During Japan's aggressive expansion throughout Asia, fears of a direct invasion on Australian soil grew (Dean, 1985). British forces were already stretched thin across multiple fronts, sparking doubts about whether Australia's "mother country" could provide adequate support in the Pacific region (National Museum of Australia, 2024). This led to a major reconsideration of Australia's priorities regarding its national defences and strategies. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 – the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbour – Australian Prime Minister John Curtin (1941, p.10) declared: *"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"*. This statement both shocked and infuriated the world as it signified Australia's divergence from prioritising its traditional British alliance to prioritising its new American alliance (National Museum of Australia, 2024). Despite the uproar from Curtin's decision, its effects were evident in the motivation of Australian soldiers from 1941 onwards, with many stating that their service was to protect Australia, rather than Britain (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2020). However, the final catalyst of this shift occurred after the fall of Singapore on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1942 (*The fall of Singapore*, 2024). Singapore was a key British stronghold between Australia and Japan, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill promised it would be

impenetrable (Glueckstein, 2015). The unexpected and rapid collapse of this stronghold led to the capture of approximately 15,000 Australian troops, severely damaging Australian morale (National Museum of Australia, 2023). The fall of Singapore revealed that the Allies had severely underestimated the strength of Japan, casting doubt on Britain's ability to oppose the growing empire (Imperial War Museum, 2024). This, in combination with Churchill being more focused on Europe, resulted in the exacerbation of Australia's fears of Japan in both Parliament and the public (National Museum of Australia, 2023). This change in attitudes can be seen through the evolution of Australian propaganda posters. In Figure 1, the 1942 poster vividly illustrates the distress Australians felt after the fall of Singapore. It underscores the urgent need for Australians to defend themselves against Japan and spurred thousands of Australians to join the war effort – with no mention of the British Empire. Therefore, Australian involvement in the war was not driven solely by its connections with Britain, but also by the threat to its national interests and security.

The involvement of ATSI Australians in WWII further exemplifies the complexity of attitudes within Australians during the war effort. In 1939, Indigenous Australians were prohibited from enlisting due to racial discrimination (Australian War Memorial, 2024). However, as the threat of Japan grew, the government grew desperate for volunteers and thus, allowed over 3,000 Indigenous people to join the war effort (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). Their motivations often differed from non-Indigenous Australians, particularly regarding the protection of Britain. For example, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Indigenous woman, enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWMS) in 1942 and later humorously remarked, *"It was a good opportunity for an Aboriginal to further their education... there were only two places where an Aboriginal could get an education, in jail or the Army and I didn't fancy jail!"* (Deadly Story, n.d.). This statement emphasises that for many Indigenous Australians, enlisting was not solely about loyalty to the British Commonwealth. Instead, it was seen as an opportunity to gain education, skills training, and personal advancement (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). This viewpoint highlights the unique motivations of Australian soldiers, showcasing the importance of considering ATSI perspectives. Similarly, financial incentives were also crucial in motivating ATSI Australians to enlist. The promise of

regular wages offered economic stability during a period of racism where ATSI Australians had limited employment opportunities (Australian War Memorial, 2024). On top of that, Indigenous recruits were – for the first time – paid at an equal rate to non-Indigenous recruits in the army, providing further incentive to enlist (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). Moreover, many ATSI Australians enlisted due to cultural factors. For some Indigenous soldiers, the defence of Australia carried more deep and spiritual significance in connection to the land. Many Indigenous Australians viewed their participation as an extension of their duties to protect their ancestral lands from foreign invasion (Smith, 2018). Additionally, many Indigenous Australians enlisted as a means of challenging and escaping the systemic racism they faced in their everyday lives (Beaumont & Moss, 2018). By fighting alongside their fellow Australians, they aimed to prove their worth and claim a place in history, believing it would allow for more equitable treatment in post-war Australia (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). However, despite their significant contributions, many Indigenous veterans continued to face discrimination and were often denied the same benefits as their non-Indigenous counterparts (Orsag, 2024). Nevertheless, their participation did create a gradual shift in public perception and laid the groundwork for future advocacy and reforms (Webber, 2020). Thus, the involvement of ATSI Australians was complex and largely unrelated to the Australian-British relationship.

Therefore, the belief that Australia's involvement in WWII was a product of its ties to Britain is overly simplistic and neglects other critical factors. While initially driven by its loyalty to Britain, Australia's participation in the war evolved significantly, particularly as the threat from Japan intensified. Furthermore, the experiences of ATSI Australians during the war reveal that their motivations were influenced by an array of factors that were unrelated to Britain. These diverse perspectives demonstrate that Australia's participation in WWII was shaped by a multitude of factors. Thus, the claim that Australia and individual Australians went to war solely due to the country's relationship with Great Britain overlooks broader factors, making the statement's accuracy limited.

## Appendix

Figure 1



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