

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



“Finest hour”: the British Commonwealth at war

A Wellington bomber over Hamburg or Tobruk; a landing craft off Sicily, Normandy or the Arakan; a Spitfire squadron over Britain or Burma; a corvette in the Atlantic or the Pacific: in these settings, and hundreds of others besides, servicemen, and even a few women, from British Commonwealth nations came together during the Second World War.

Britain and the dominion nations were the only powers that fought in the war from its beginning in September 1939 to its end in August 1945. Their forces served in all theatres of war, from the gale-swept wastes of the Atlantic, to the skies over Europe, the forests and fields of Europe, the desert of North Africa and the jungles and seas of south-east Asia. Each nation was wholly committed to the war effort, and some (notably Britain but also Australia) suffered direct attack.

Each nation contributed in particular ways to the triumphant demonstration during the Second World War that the Commonwealth that had grown out of the Empire could make a credible, even vital, contribution to freedom’s victory. In June 1940, as Winston Churchill steeled the people of Britain against the onslaught which he named in advance as the Battle of Britain, he inspired Britons to “so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth lasts for a thousand years men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’” Churchill lived to see the old empire dismantled over the next quarter century, but his oratorical prophecy, broadened to encompass the Commonwealth’s response to the challenge of the war as a whole, may yet be valid.

The twentieth century saw the transformation of Empire into Commonwealth, and the Second World War was a critical phase of intense change. The war challenged British tendencies to regard the interests of Britain and its dominions as uniform, and each nation’s response to war reflected a growing awareness that it was always possible national interests might prevail over the common cause. For example, while Australia immediately followed Britain in declaring war on Germany – a reflection of the Menzies Government’s close monitoring of the European crisis in the summer of 1939 rather than the knee-jerk imperialism it is often portrayed as – other dominions took a more independent stance. Canada debated for seven days whether to enter the war. Later in the war the opposite tendency was seen. While unthreatened Canada contributed troops to the war in Italy and north-west Europe, the Australian government decided to withdraw most of its forces from Europe and concentrate its war effort against the Japanese threat at home. Each weighed its national interests against the implications of membership of empire and alliance.

Despite these different decisions and emphases the most notable aspect of the Commonwealth’s war remains its unity and overwhelming harmony. Whatever differences were expressed between its member states and whatever controversial

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



decisions and disasters divided them – Dieppe, Tobruk or Singapore – the Commonwealth’s forces were more closely integrated than those of any other Allied nations. National armies operated in Commonwealth forces; their ships formed joint fleets and task forces; their airmen, trained under one coordinated scheme, became members of what was virtually a Commonwealth air force. The Commonwealth was the closest coalition in the Allied war effort, united by a strong sense of kinship, by common military ideas, procedures and relationships, and by the pressing imperative that disunity threatened defeat.

At the same time, the war these three nations – Australia, Britain and Canada – fought was a diverse one. The Commonwealth’s members often fought quite different wars, concentrating on some theatres of war and not on others. The mix influenced both the experience and the memory of war for the three nations. Canada’s memory of the war is overwhelmingly of the Atlantic – in 1945, its navy was the largest after those of the major powers – or of the liberation of western Europe. While Australians served in both the Commonwealth’s Eighth Army and in Bomber Command, its predominant memory is of the war against Japan. While Britain and Canada’s armies fought for the liberation of western Europe, Australian forces served from 1943 mainly in Papua New Guinea and the islands to Australia’s north. Even when all contributed to one theatre (as in Italy from 1943 to 1945, for example) they did so in proportions which influenced both experience and memory. (Canada contributed divisions to a mainly British force, while Australia contributed a few squadrons and aircrew to British squadrons in the Desert Air Force.)

Britain, as the major Allied power (at least up to the entry into the war of the United States) provided forces in almost every theatre. For six years it sustained large forces in several major theatres: in the Atlantic, in the air war over Europe, in North Africa and the Mediterranean, and in south-east Asia. There was hardly any area of the war in which the British Commonwealth did not contribute. With the world’s largest single navy at the outbreak of war, Britain had warships serving all over the world, protecting the trade routes that kept Britain alive and its war effort supplied in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, and from late 1941 in Asia and the Indian Ocean. In 1945 a major British fleet returned to the Pacific, based on Sydney, to participate in the final months of the war against Japan.

Both Britain and Australia maintained or contributed substantially to major campaigns against the Japanese, though in distinct theatres. Britain fought a protracted war from British India against the Japanese in Burma (in which Australian aircrew and ships joined), while Australia’s main effort from 1942 was directed, under American command, against the Japanese occupying Papua New Guinea. And while both Australia and Britain lost tens of thousands as prisoners to the Japanese, their respective memories have been very different. Australian prisoners of the Japanese have become emblematic of Australia’s war, while British “Far East” prisoners of war have been regarded as

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



marginal: just as Australian prisoners of the Germans have tended to be overshadowed by prisoners of the Japanese.

But Canadians also served against Japan. Few outside Canada are aware of the Canadian battalions that defended Hong Kong in December 1941, and which shared the ordeal of captivity under the Japanese. Canadian forces also joined the US campaign against the Japanese in the Aleutian islands in the far north of the Pacific, and served alongside Australian air crew in the air war over Burma. A few Canadians even served in Australia, notably as members of “Central Bureau”, the Allied code-breaking organisation for the South-West Pacific Area.

The Commonwealth’s land, sea and air forces served in various combinations, and it is possible to find many connections between individuals and small groups. Officers and men served alongside each other on exchange and attachment almost everywhere. In North Africa an Australian and a Canadian, survivors of a Wellington shot down over Tobruk, survived an epic trek through the Libyan desert together in 1942. Likewise, in Papua New Guinea – essentially an Australian and American theatre – officers of the British army served on attachment during the great New Guinea offensive of 1943–44. Though supposedly observers, several of them became involved in combat and at least one lies today in the war cemetery at Bomana, near Port Moresby. Similarly, a small number of Australian sailors crewed, and even commanded, landing craft carrying Canadians ashore to Juno Beach on D-Day.

Perhaps the most striking example of Commonwealth cooperation was in the air war over Europe, and especially in the bomber offensive, where the Commonwealth nations contributed their share to the long and costly battle over Germany. The Empire Air Training Scheme (later the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, perhaps the last great symbol of imperial unity of purpose) took trainees from Britain and all of the dominions and at training stations located across Canada turned out aircrew for the Commonwealth’s air forces. Governed by a complex agreement struck in Ottawa in the war’s opening months (itself a sign of dominion assertiveness), the scheme produced aircrew who each wore shoulder flashes denoting their membership of the Commonwealth’s constituent air forces. But they were posted to squadrons almost irrespective of nationality. While individual squadrons remained nominally national and while later in the war Canada uniquely and tenaciously formed its own group of squadrons in Bomber Command, in practice aircrew were posted wherever they were needed.

This mixing had several consequences. First, it meant that even nominally “national” squadrons included large proportions of men of other forces. “Australian” squadrons often included men from New Zealand, Canada, all parts of Britain, and even from colonies such as Southern Rhodesia or Barbados. This created a truly “Commonwealth” air force, distinguished by uniform (Australians wore a violet blue in contrast to the

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



lighter RAF blue worn by Britons and Canadians) but united by language, culture, training, slang, and – not least – shared risk. Airmen debated the merits of whether men served best international or in mixed squadrons: the consensus was that mixed units put everyone on their mettle and brought out the best of each for all.

On what was called (in a total war in which propaganda played a vital part) the “home front”, civilians became a crucial resource. In all three nations the vast bulk of the armed forces comprised civilians who became soldiers, sailors or airmen for the duration. While Britain had supplemented its regular and reserve forces with a conscription scheme dating from before the war, for both Australia and Canada overseas service remained largely a voluntary matter, though later in the war Australian conscripts fought in New Guinea and the islands. In all three countries men, and increasingly women, became deployable “manpower” able to be drafted into the services or to industry. The demands of the services and the war economy bit particularly deeply in Britain itself, in which a massive proportion of the population (perhaps 65 per cent, and a correspondingly larger proportion of the workforce) was committed to the services, war production, or war-related voluntary work. Britain was of course also the only Commonwealth nation to lose large numbers of civilians to direct enemy action, with over 60,000 civilians dead and many more wounded in German bombing attacks between 1940 and early 1945.

But all suffered grievously. Though costing fewer lives than the Great War, the Second World War cost the Commonwealth significant losses. Australia and Canada each lost 40,000 dead from forces each totalling about a million. Britain, with 47 million people, lost over 300,000 dead, a disproportionately heavy toll partly explained by Britain’s civilian casualties, both in bombing and in the Merchant Navy. In Australia and Canada all but a few hundred of the dead were members of the services, the vast majority of whom died overseas. Australia’s losses relative to population (seven million compared to Canada’s 11 million) were incurred because a substantial proportion (over 8,000) died as prisoners of the Japanese. Because of its greater commitment to the air force over Europe, however, as many Canadians died in the Royal Canadian Air Force as did Australians in the entire war against Japan: about 17,000. Thus each of the nations of the Commonwealth had reason to regret and remember the sacrifices exacted in the war. It is salutary to be reminded, however, that still greater were the losses suffered by the defeated nations of Germany and Japan or the war’s major victims, the Soviet Union and China.

Though still within living memory, the Second World War is receding inexorably into the past, and many people in all countries have only the vaguest knowledge of their shared history. It might surprise Australians to learn that Canadians fought for Hong Kong, or that British Spitfires defended Darwin. Do Canadians recall the graves of airmen who died on the prairies in training accidents; do Britons recall that Canadian and Australian troops were stationed in southern England ready to meet the expected German invasion in 1940? Dieppe is known to few Australians but remains a white hot word in Canada.

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



While to Canadians Kokoda is not even a familiar name, many Australians recognise few other names in the war. Many Britons know little of their own war effort, let alone that of the Commonwealth as a whole, and they have understandably vague notions of both where in the world British forces served and which Commonwealth nations served alongside them. As well as offering insights into how the Second World War was documented and interpreted artistically, then, this exhibition also offers a means by which Australians, Britons and Canadians can learn more about experiences they shared over sixty years ago.

Britain itself and the two largest dominions, Australia and Canada, took the brunt of the Commonwealth's war effort in the Second World War. (India's contribution as a whole dwarfed those of the so-called "white" dominions, of course; but an independent India soon lost interest in a war perceived as having been fought for empire.) Sixty years on, then, the world has changed. Virtually all of the countries that had been part of the Empire have achieved independence. The Commonwealth has changed too, though not out of all recognition. The ties that drew the Commonwealth to support the war effort between 1939 and 1945 remain, if in attenuated form. Now united by a sometimes fragile compound of sentiment, heritage, friendship, sport and shared values (not always equal to the pressures of economic interest), the Commonwealth remains an important world forum. On the anniversary of final victory, what was widely regarded as the Commonwealth's finest achievement, it is fitting to recall the joint exertions and successes of the Commonwealth at war.

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