

The British Empire in the Pacific War

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The British Empire occupies an ambivalent place in the history of the Pacific War. At first, it might have been thought that the Empire would have played a major role in the war. After all, at the outbreak of the Second World War the British Empire, with 500 million subjects, was the world's superpower, covering a quarter of the world's land surface. In the Asia-Pacific region, Britain ruled India, Burma, Malaya, Singapore, British Borneo, Hong Kong and a series of small island colonies across the central and southern Pacific Ocean. The British dominions, Australia and New Zealand, had vital interests in the Pacific, while Canada had a large Pacific coastline. Clearly, the British Empire ought to have been a major protagonist in any Pacific conflict.

But barely six months into the Pacific War, the British Empire had been almost eliminated from the field. Eighteen months later, when the British Empire had re-established its influence in the Pacific War, its effort paled almost into insignificance beside that of the United States. How then could Britain and its empire re-build some sort of standing in the post-war Pacific? I will be exploring this important question, but first it is necessary to note that the British Empire consisted of several different components.¹ Some parts of the empire were colonies that were directly ruled or administered by Britain. The largest and most valuable colony was India, which had a very substantial army, but with mainly British officers. Some elements of the Empire consisted of protectorates over which Britain exercised control, usually in the area of international affairs. The dominions, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and in a special case, Ireland, were self-governing members of the Empire. Technically they were members of a body known as the British Commonwealth of Nations. Their armed forces could only be deployed with the permission of their own governments. But the dominions still considered themselves to be part of the British Empire and during the war their forces usually operated under British strategic direction. The prime exception was the direction of Australian forces after 1942.

Before the Second World War, Britain failed to prepare adequately to defend its empire in the Asia-Pacific region. Partly this was caused by the fact that Britain had been weakened by the First World War and no longer had the capacity to spread its armed forces across the globe. Defence in the Far East was built around the so-called Singapore strategy. Britain started to build a huge naval base at Singapore, to which it would send a major fleet in time of threat in the Far East. There

¹ For a good general coverage of the empire during the war see Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*; Hambledon Continuum, London, 2006.

were several weaknesses in this strategy. First, it was only likely that Japan would strike when Britain was pre-occupied in Europe, and in that case it would be difficult for Britain to spare naval forces to send to Singapore. This is, in fact, what happened; Japan attacked once Britain was deeply engaged in Europe. Second, Singapore was vulnerable to attack from the land. So Britain needed to deploy adequate forces to defend mainland Malaya; but with the outbreak of war in Europe, Britain gave the defence of Malaya a lower priority. Conscious of the need to defend Malaya, Australia sent the best part of a division to Malaya; it could not send more because it had already sent three divisions to assist Britain in the Middle East.

Before discussing what the British Empire did during the Pacific War we need to remember that broad Allied strategy was determined by a conference in Washington in February 1941, when Britain and the United States agreed that in the event of Japan and the United States entering the war the allies would concentrate their efforts on defeating Hitler first. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, met in Washington and confirmed this strategy. But at least two key Allied players did not agree with this strategy. Stung by the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Navy wanted to concentrate its effort in the Pacific. The other key player was Australia, which was not consulted about the strategy, and naturally, with Japanese forces approaching from the north, remained adamant that it must apply its main military effort in the Pacific.²

As we all know, between December 1941 and March 1942 Japanese forces conducted one of history's most successful military campaigns. As well as striking at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, Japan invaded Malaya and advanced south. Allied forces in South-East Asia were formed into the American, British, Dutch Australian (ABDA) Command, under General Sir Archibald Wavell, but they could do little to stop the onslaught. On 15 February 1942 Singapore surrendered – an event described by Churchill as the ‘worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history’.³ It shattered British prestige in Asia, and this was important because prestige was a vital buttress to imperial rule. Elsewhere the Japanese attacked and seized Hong Kong. The garrison of British and Indian troops included two battalions of Canadians, Canada’s only army contribution to the Pacific War. The Royal Navy also lost heavily, including the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* on 10 December 1941. By May 1942, British forces had been chased out of

² There is vast literature on Allied strategy in the Pacific, but for a useful although now dated bibliography see Jeffrey G Barlowe, ‘American and Allied Strategy and Campaigns in the Pacific War, 1941-1945’, in Lloyd E. Lee, (ed.), *World War II in Asia and the Pacific and the War’s Aftermath, with General Themes: A Handbook of Literature and Research*, Greenwood Press, Wesport Conn., 1998.

³ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV, The Hinge of Fate*, Cassell, London, 1951, p. 81. There are numerous books on the fall of Singapore, but a useful recent book is Brian Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singaproe, 1940-1942*, Tempus, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2005.

Burma, the Borneo colonies had fallen, and Japanese forces had seized the Dutch East Indies, the American-controlled Philippines and the north coast of New Guinea.

Japan took every opportunity to remind the peoples of the former British, and for that matter, Dutch and American colonies, that they had helped them to throw off the yoke of their European masters. While the local people soon found the Japanese to be even more tyrannical rulers, the idea of gaining independence was not lost and would be pursued successfully, although not always without further conflict, after the war.

By mid 1942, at least temporarily, Britain was effectively knocked out of the Pacific War, but one part of the Empire, namely Australia, was still intensely involved. Australia's part in the Pacific War was completely out of proportion to its size. In 1939 Australia had a population of just 7 million, and its industrial base was weak. In the First World War it had sent large numbers of troops to fight in Europe, but its homeland had not been placed under threat. Similarly, it sent forces to fight in the Middle East in the first years of the Second World War. The outbreak and early months of the Pacific War came as a great shock to Australia. Not only did it lose the equivalent of more than a full infantry division in the fall of Singapore and in Java, Timor, Ambon and Rabaul, but by March-April 1942 it seemed that Japan was on the doorstep, preparing to invade. Britain had no capacity to intervene and American help was at first tenuous. In fact, the United States was not interested in defending Australia for its own sake; but it was interested in protecting and building up Australia as a base for future operations.

Over recent years there has been an intense, although rather sterile debate in Australia as to whether Japan actually intended to invade Australia in 1942.⁴ The debate has been built around the claim that to say the Japanese did not plan to invade Australia somehow denigrates Australia's military achievements and sacrifice. The truth is that the Japanese did not actually intend to invade Australia at that time, but they did plan to isolate Australia from the United States, and thereby eliminate it as a base for any allied counter attack. Australian leaders did not know this at the time and had every reason to act as though the invasion threat was real. After all, Japanese aircraft had bombed the northern city of Darwin, had invaded the Australian-administered part of New Guinea and would shortly send submarines into Sydney Harbour and land in the Australian territory of Papua. Many Australian troops were still in the Middle East, the militia was just being mobilised, and the navy and air force were weak. Australia had only a limited capacity to resist invasion.

For Australia, the Pacific War was certainly a case of total war. Earlier in the Second World

⁴ For the argument that Australia was in dire threat see Bob Wurth, *1942 Australia's Greatest Peril*, Macmillan, Sydney 2008; for the contrary view see Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia*, 1942, Viking, Camberwell, Vic, 2008.

War, Australia raised four divisions for service overseas, three in the Middle East and another in Malaya and the islands. Large numbers of Australian airmen had been trained and were serving in Britain. Most of the navy was serving under British command.

With the outbreak of war in the Pacific, the Australian Government applied total war measures. The Australian militia went to full-time duty. Most of Australia's troops in the Middle East returned home, as did many of its ships, while the air force underwent further expansion. By mid 1942 the Australian Army had twelve divisions in Australia and New Guinea, that is directly available for the defence of Australia, with one in Ceylon and another in the Middle East. At its peak, during the Second World War the Australian Army reached a strength of 540,000 soldiers, and throughout the war 735,781 Australians spent some time in the army.⁵ The Air Force reached a strength of 180,000, with 48 squadrons. From a population of about 7 million, about 1 million Australians, or one in seven, were in uniform during the war. By the beginning of 1943 the entire Australian Army was serving in the Pacific theatre, because, of course, Australia itself was located in the Pacific theatre.

By way of comparison, on the outbreak of the Pacific War the United States had a population of 141 million. By April 1945 the US Army had 1.45 million soldiers deployed in the Pacific and the China-Burma-India theatres. Certainly the United States had about a further 4.5 million soldiers in other theatres, as well as huge naval and air forces. But on simple statistics the United States had a population twenty times that of Australia, but the US Army in the Pacific was about three times the size of the Australian Army.

On top of this military commitment, the Australian Government introduced manpower controls which forced workers into specific war-related industries. Rationing had been introduced earlier in the war, but was tightened further. Women served in the three services and were conscripted to work in factories. Australia underwent a rapid industrialisation. Before the end of the war, Australian factories were producing all manner of guns, ammunition and vehicles. Australian factories manufactured about 3,500 aircraft of all types. Shipyards built 60 corvettes as well as 14 frigates and three destroyers.

After the collapse of ABDA Command in March 1942 two allied commands were formed in the Pacific - Pacific Ocean Command under Admiral Chester Nimitz, based in Hawaii, and the South West Pacific Area under General Douglas MacArthur, based in Australia. Higher level strategy in the Pacific was determined by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, that is the British and

⁵ *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, No 37, 1946 and 1947*, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1949, p. 1150. For Australian statistics more generally see Joan Beaumont, *Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001.

American Chiefs of Staff sitting together. In turn the Combined Chiefs sub-contracted detailed control to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Other allied countries such as Australia, Canada, China and the Netherlands believed they were being cut out of the decision-making, and in response a Pacific War Council was set up to provide higher level direction. But the Pacific War Council never achieved much influence. Decision-making remained in the hands of the Combined Chiefs.

This lack of influence was particularly important for Australia, which was actually playing a significant role in the Pacific War.⁶ The South West Pacific Area included all of the Australian forces except those serving in Europe and the Middle East, and the Australian Army formed the majority of MacArthur's land forces. Earlier I mentioned that in mid 1942 the Australian Army had twelve divisions in the South West Pacific Area; by comparison MacArthur had two American divisions.

From mid 1942 to the end of 1943 most of the major battles of the Pacific War were fought in the South and South West Pacific, the prime exception being the Battle of Midway in June 1942. First the allies halted the Japanese advance at Guadalcanal and in Papua in late 1942, and then they mounted a counter offensive through the Solomon Islands and New Guinea. The Guadalcanal campaign, with large naval as well as land battles, was fought in and around a British colony, the Solomon Islands, but was conducted mainly by US forces. Without the Australian Army, however, MacArthur would not have been able to conduct his campaigns in New Guinea. During the first campaign, which defeated the Japanese advance in Papua in 1942, Australia deployed three infantry divisions and the Americans one. Then, during 1943 five Australian divisions conducted a major offensive which cleared the Japanese from a large part of eastern New Guinea. Thus through Australia's contribution, the British Empire played a key part in the main theatre of the Pacific War and at the crucial time.

Australia, however, could not maintain this level of manpower commitment, and by the beginning of 1944 the Australian Army had been reduced to eight divisions available for operations in the theatre, which was about the same number that MacArthur had. By the third quarter of 1944 MacArthur had eighteen US army divisions.⁷ Admittedly the American naval and air forces were considerably larger than their Australian counterparts, which nonetheless contributed substantially to the campaigns.

⁶ For Australia's efforts to influence Allied strategy see D. M. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra and George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

⁷ For comparisons of Australian and US Army numbers see David Horner, 'Combined Operations in the Southwest Pacific: The Australian Army in MacArthur's Operations', in Judith L. Bellafaire, *The US Army and World War II: Selected Papers from the Army's Commemorative Conferences*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington DC, 1998.

While the Australian Army was conducted gruelling but successful operations in 1942 and 1943, the British-Indian Army was suffering another defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the Arakan area along the India-Burma border. The British-Indian Army needed to undertake a painful process of expansion and retraining before it could take on the Japanese successfully.

In October 1943 the Allied South East Asia Command was formed under Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten with its headquarters in Ceylon. Mountbatten's tasks were to increase pressure on the Japanese and thus force them to transfer forces from the Pacific Theatre, to maintain the airborne supply route to China and to open a land supply route through northern Burma. South East Asia Command's operations were the cause of much bitter argument between the British and the Americans, exemplified by the American claim that the command's initials, SEAC, stood for Save England's Asian Colonies.⁸ There was much truth in this, and the Americans did not necessarily share this aim.⁹

British forces in Southeast Asia were always afforded a low priority for men and equipment, and it would have been impossible for Britain to conduct operations in this area without the assistance of forces raised in India. Of the one million troops serving in South East Asia Command, 700,000 were Indian, 100,000 were British and about 90,000 came from British colonies in West and East Africa. The equivalent of about seventeen Indian divisions served outside India during the war; of these, two served in Malaya and eleven in Burma.

Britain provided a larger proportion of the air forces. In December 1943, for example, Air Command South East Asia had an effective strength of 67 squadrons. Of these, 44 were from the Royal Air Force, nineteen from the USAAF, two from the Royal Indian Air Force and one each from the Royal Canadian and Royal Netherlands Air Forces.

The British Eastern Fleet operated in the Indian Ocean, but was not a strong force until 1944. In November 1943 it had one battleship, one escort carrier, seven cruisers, two armed merchant cruisers, eleven destroyers, thirteen escort vessels and six submarines.

The British Fourteenth Army, under General Sir William Slim, was not ready for an offensive into Burma until early 1944, when the Japanese struck first in a belated and ill-considered attempt to invade India. The Japanese offensive brought to life a previously stagnant theatre. The Fourteenth Army defeated the Japanese attacks along the Indian border in the first half of 1944, with major battles in Arakan and at Kohima and Imphal. For the Japanese it was a disastrous

⁸ I. C. B. Dear (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 1027.

⁹ The groundbreaking study in US-British relations in the Pacific was Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941-1945*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978.

offensive; of the invading force of 85,000 fighting troops 53,000 became casualties, 30,000 being killed. The way was clear for Slim to advance into Burma.¹⁰

But the Pacific War was now developing so rapidly that the British advance was likely to be strategically irrelevant. Earlier I mentioned the Allied strategy of ‘Beat Hitler First’, and in broad terms this strategy was confirmed in the series of major conferences between Churchill, Roosevelt and their military advisers, held periodically in various places such as Casablanca, Washington and Quebec. But towards the end of 1943 and into 1944 Britain was becoming acutely aware that the United States was likely to win the war in the Pacific by itself, thereby cutting Britain out of any post-war arrangements in the Pacific. The United States had already liberated some British Pacific Island territories, and Britain saw it as a political and military imperative to restore its presence in the region and to deploy its forces directly against Japan. Britain was determined that its forces should recapture its colonies such as Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Churchill became involved in a bitter dispute with his Chiefs of Staff over how to maximise Britain’s effort in the Pacific. Churchill wanted to invade Sumatra. The Chiefs wanted to thrust northwards from Darwin in northern Australia into the East Indies thus forming a command that would advance on the left of MacArthur’s South West Pacific Area. The Australian Army commander, General Sir Thomas Blamey, was attracted by this latter strategy, hoping perhaps to command the new theatre, and fearful that MacArthur would sideline the Australians if they remained under his command. But the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, wanted to keep his forces operating with and under MacArthur.

These British plans were overtaken by events. As fast as the British came up with new strategies, American advances made them redundant. Beginning in November 1943 with the landing at Tarawa, the US Navy advanced rapidly through the Central Pacific and by June 1944 had seized Saipan in the Marianas, allowing the Americans to bomb Japan. MacArthur too had moved quickly; by September 1944 he had advanced along the north coast of New Guinea and had reached Morotai in the Halmaheras. Finally the British realised that the best they could do was to provide a large fleet to operate with the US Navy in the advance towards Japan.

The shape of the last year of the Pacific War, and particularly the British Empire’s part in it, was set at important meetings in Quebec and Washington in mid September and early October 1944. At Quebec, Churchill, Roosevelt and their Chiefs of Staff agreed that Mountbatten’s

¹⁰ Useful recent studies of the Burma campaign include Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2000; Daniel Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign*, Praeger, London, 2003; and Jon Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War*, John Murray, London, 2004.

South-East Asia Command would undertake an offensive into Burma; its forces were eventually to invade Malaya and capture Singapore. The Americans, however, would conduct the remainder of the offensives, including the strategic bombing campaign against Japan, and a landing at Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Eventually the Allies would have to invade Japan, and after the end of the war in Europe the Soviet Union would invade Manchuria to hold down the large Japanese army there.

The United States was in two minds about accepting support from its allies. It welcomed assistance in its efforts to defeat Japan. But it also wanted to control the post-war outcome in the Pacific and it was therefore reluctant to allow its allies to play a major part. Britain was excluded because its forces, based in India, could not operate easily in the Pacific. Churchill knew that the Burma offensive would take a while to complete, and by that time the United States would be closing in on Japan. He therefore offered to provide a major fleet to operate with the US Navy in the Pacific. The Americans accepted the offer, but it remained to be seen how quickly the British Fleet could be assembled and deployed.

Then, in the midst of the conference Admiral Nimitz reported that there appeared to be few Japanese in the central Philippines. As a result, on 15 September the US Joint Chiefs approved a landing by MacArthur's forces on Leyte, beginning on 20 October. The landing on Mindanao was abandoned. Finally, in Washington on 3 October the Joint Chiefs agreed that MacArthur's forces would invade Luzon on 20 December 1944. Nimitz's Central Pacific Command would seize Iwo Jima in late January 1945, and would move on to Okinawa on 1 March. These operations, if they took place, would leave Britain languishing well behind.

In the last year of the Pacific War the British Empire's forces were involved in three major campaigns — those of the Fourteenth Army in Burma, of the Australians in New Guinea and Borneo, and of the British Pacific Fleet in the approach to Japan. None were likely to change the course of the war.

By the time the Fourteenth Army's invasion of Burma began in December 1944 the Americans were already in the Philippines. Nonetheless, the Fourteenth Army's campaign in Burma, conducted by six divisions in a force numbering 260,000, was brilliantly successful. It destroyed four Japanese divisions and seized Rangoon in May 1945. Burma was liberated, British pride was restored and the campaign had tied down and actually destroyed Japanese forces which might have been deployed elsewhere. In fact, the Fourteenth Army killed more Japanese soldiers than any other Allied formation in the war. But in strategic terms the 1945 Burma campaign had only a marginal effect on the outcome of the war. The way was now clear for the British to prepare for the invasion of Malaya. Organised by Mountbatten's command, the landing, known as

Operation Zipper, took place in September 1945, after Japan surrendered.

The Australian operations were less spectacular but more controversial.¹¹ Although MacArthur had relied on the Australian Army in 1942 and 1943, he had no intention of using its divisions in the Philippines unless he was faced with a disaster there. For political and personal reasons he was determined that the Americans alone should liberate the Philippines. Instead he relegated the Australians to garrison roles in New Guinea, New Britain and Bougainville. The Australian Government did not have sufficient influence to change this policy. General Blamey was not happy with the garrison role and mounted offensives to clear the large Japanese forces that were still holding out in New Guinea and Bougainville in a similar manner to the American offensives in the southern Philippines at the same time. The controversy revolves around the fact that after the Americans, under Nimitz, landed at Okinawa on 1 April 1945, thus closing the ring around Japan, all operations south of there were strategically irrelevant. This did not stop MacArthur from ordering two Australian divisions to seized key locations in Borneo, which they did after skilful amphibious landings between May and July 1945.

I need to comment a little more about these operations if only because of the appearance in 2007 of Max Hastings's best-selling book *Nemesis*, published in the United States as *Retribution*. The title of Hastings' chapter covering the Australian operations in 1944-45 is called 'Australians "Bludging" and "Mopping Up"'. In Australia, 'bludging' means to evade responsibilities and to live off the efforts of others. Hastings refers to 'the limited military contribution being made by this country of seven million people'.¹² I have already referred to the deployment of five Australian divisions during the 1943 offensives – hardly a limited military contribution, especially considering the difficulties of transporting the forces to New Guinea and supporting them there as they fought in extremely demanding tropical conditions. In July 1945 Australia had more infantry divisions (six of its seven) in action at one time than in any other month of the war. The other divisions had been demobilised so that Australia could continue to provide food and other supplies to Britain and the US forces in the Pacific – a crucial war contribution. Proportionally, Australia was the only allied country with more troops in action after the defeat of Germany than before. In terms of casualties to its warriors, Australia's sacrifice in the war was about average among the allies of roughly comparable populations. As a proportion of total population, Britain's deaths

¹¹ There are a good numbers of books on Australia's operations in 1944-45, but for a summary, including the arguments that at least some of the operations were justifiable, see David Horner, 'The Final Campaigns of the Pacific War', in Peter Dennis (ed.), *1945: War and Peace in the Pacific: Selected Essays*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1999.

¹² Max Hastings, *Nemesis: The battle for Japan, 1944-45*, Harper Press, London, 2007, p. 366.

were about three times those of Australia's, while America's were about half those of Australia.¹³

Hastings was right in one respect, as has been noted by many Australian historians over the past fifty years, in the last year of the war Australia's troops were certainly sidelined by MacArthur into campaigns that could not affect the outcome of the war. Further, once it was clear that Australia was no longer under threat of invasion, the commitment of the Australian civilian population to total war measures quickly evaporated. Australia never suffered the casualties to its civilian population and the destruction of its infrastructure as happened in many other countries in Europe and across Asia.

The British Pacific Fleet was formed from the British East Indies Fleet which, with additional ships, sailed to Australia early in 1945 to prepare for operations with the Americans.¹⁴ With two battleships, four carriers, five cruisers and fourteen destroyers in its main strike force, it was the largest and most powerful British fleet of the war. Most ships were British with a few Canadian ships. Australia provided nine destroyers, which had previously been serving in the Indian Ocean, and more than a dozen corvettes. The majority of Australian ships, cruisers, destroyers and landing ships had been serving with the US Navy in the South West Pacific since 1942 and they continued to serve under American task groups until the end of the war. The deployment of the British Pacific Fleet required the formation of a large fleet train which until then the Royal Navy had not required.

The British naval task force served with the Americans during the fighting around Okinawa, but it was not directly involved in the Okinawa landing. After maintenance in Australia the fleet returned to strike at Japan in the last days of the war. While by British standards its fleet was large, it formed only a fraction of the naval force deployed by the Americans, and made only a minor contribution to the war. For example, the British Pacific Fleet had four carriers in action during the Okinawa campaign; the US Navy had 40. Indeed, the British soon learned that the US Navy was far more proficient at air operations and at operating for long periods away from land bases. The main value of the deployment of the British Pacific Fleet was to demonstrate that Britain was still involved in the war as it closed in on Japan.

At the end of the war British commanders took the surrender of the Japanese in Malaya, at Singapore and at Hong Kong, thus allowing Britain to return to its former colonies with dignity. Australian commanders took the surrender of Japanese forces in former British colonies in Borneo,

¹³ John Robertson, *Australia at War 1939-1945*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1981, p. 213.

¹⁴ For an account of the British Pacific Fleet see W. O. C. Roberts, *British Pacific Fleet*, Naval Historical Society of Australia, Sydney 1991, and Peter Smith, *Task Force 57: British Pacific Fleet, 1944-45*, Kimber, London, 1969.

as well as in the eastern part of the Dutch East Indies and in New Guinea.

After the war the British Commonwealth Occupation Force was formed to assist with the occupation of Japan. Its commander was an Australian general and it included forces from Australia, Britain, India and New Zealand.

I need to mention a few other aspects of the British Empire's part in the Pacific War. India, the 'jewel in the British Empire', played a crucial role. In 1941 it had a population of 318 million and, although it was underdeveloped and its people poor, the country was so large that it still had the capacity to provide great quantities of manufactured goods and raw materials. The outbreak of the Pacific War accelerated wartime mobilisation, and the economy was directed primarily towards supporting the British-Indian operations in Burma. There were elements here of India being involved in total war.

The war brought increased agitation for independence. Some members of the Indian National Congress party saw the war as an opportunity to put pressure on Britain; others supported the war effort but with an eye to future independence. The government had to deploy troops to put down sporadic insurrections. Despite this disruption, through the provision of troops and munitions India made a huge contribution to the conduct of the war. Nonetheless it became clear that the British Raj would not be able to continue much beyond the end of the war.

Other countries of the Empire on the Pacific Rim played only a minor role in the war. Earlier I mentioned the Canadian troops who surrendered at Hong Kong, but apart from the few ships in the British Pacific Fleet, Canada was not greatly involved in the Pacific War. New Zealand, with a population of just 1.6 million could make only a very minor contribution, and it decided to maintain its strong infantry division in the Middle East, where it served with distinction, as well as suffering heavily, in North Africa and Italy. This decision strained relations between the New Zealand and Australian governments, as Australia considered that it was carrying an unequal share of the fighting in the Pacific. Two brigades of New Zealand infantry, plus ships and aircraft served in the Solomon Islands between 1942 and 1945.

For Australia the Pacific War shaped its domestic and foreign policies for more than half a century. Frightened by the threat of invasion in 1942, Australia began a massive immigration program. By 2008 about 6.5 million people had migrated to Australia, comprising a significant proportion of the expansion of Australia's population from 7 million to more than 21 million. Australia was in a unique situation where the country was geared for total war, gained the longer term benefits of it, but did not suffer the awful destruction other countries suffered. Building partly on its wartime contribution, Australia became a significant ally of the United States in the Pacific. Australia and other former members of the British Empire no longer consider themselves to be

part of the British Empire. The Empire's successor, the Commonwealth of Nations, does not act as one concerted political or military bloc.

Britain's involvement in the Pacific War resulted in several outcomes. It suffered humiliation in 1941-1943, but through its successful and arduous campaign in Burma, its operations in the Indian Ocean, and the limited involvement of the Pacific Fleet operating with the US Navy, it was able to re-establish its presence in South-East Asia. Remarkably, at the end of the war the British Empire was at its largest, because not only did Britain recover all its territories, but it was also administering many captured territories such as Libya, Madagascar, Sicily and Syria, while Britain-Indian troops were in the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that the United States had surpassed an exhausted Britain as the world's superpower. Within a few years the decolonisation process was well under way, with India and Burma among the first to win independence. In the 1960s Britain began a policy of withdrawing from 'East of Suez'. The last British Pacific colony disappeared when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule in 1997. In retrospect, we can see that the Pacific War played a major part in hastening the demise of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific region.