

MOMENTOUS DECISIONS

Australia and World War II

John Curtin's decision to recall the 6th and 7th Divisions to Australia.

- In the Japanese plan to isolate Australia from the United States, on 23rd January 1942, five thousand Japanese troops of the elite jungle-trained South Seas Detachment stormed ashore at Rabaul in the Australian mandated territory of New Guinea and quickly overwhelmed the small Australian garrison.



A significant danger to Australia.

- The Japanese then began to develop Rabaul into a major base for further military operations against Australia and the United States in the South-West Pacific area.
- Imperial Japanese Navy aircraft carrier Kaga conducts an exercise.



An unpleasant reality: 'The mother country' no more.

- The gravity of the situation caused the Australian Government, led by Prime Minister John Curtin, to decide in February 1942 to recall Australia's AIF 6th and 7th Divisions from the Middle East to defend their own country.
- This decision was forced on Curtin by a realisation that Britain was more concerned to defend India, rather than Australia, against the Japanese, and that little material assistance in Australia's defence could be expected from Britain.



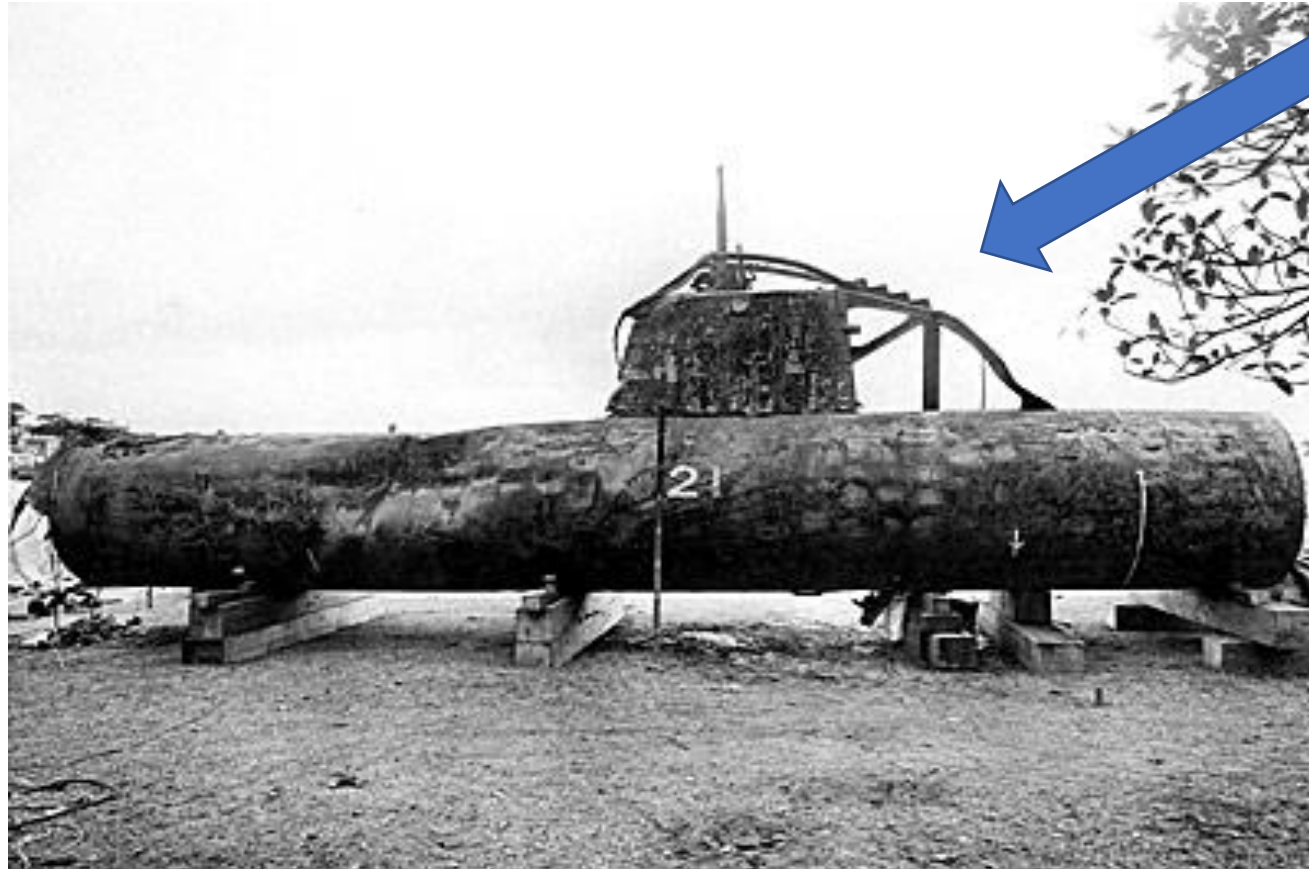
The situation becomes more dangerous.

- On the night of 31st May 1942 three Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney harbour.
- One became entangled in the boom net across the harbour, and her occupants blew her up (possibly this one?).



Maybe the same one?

Missing in previous photo?



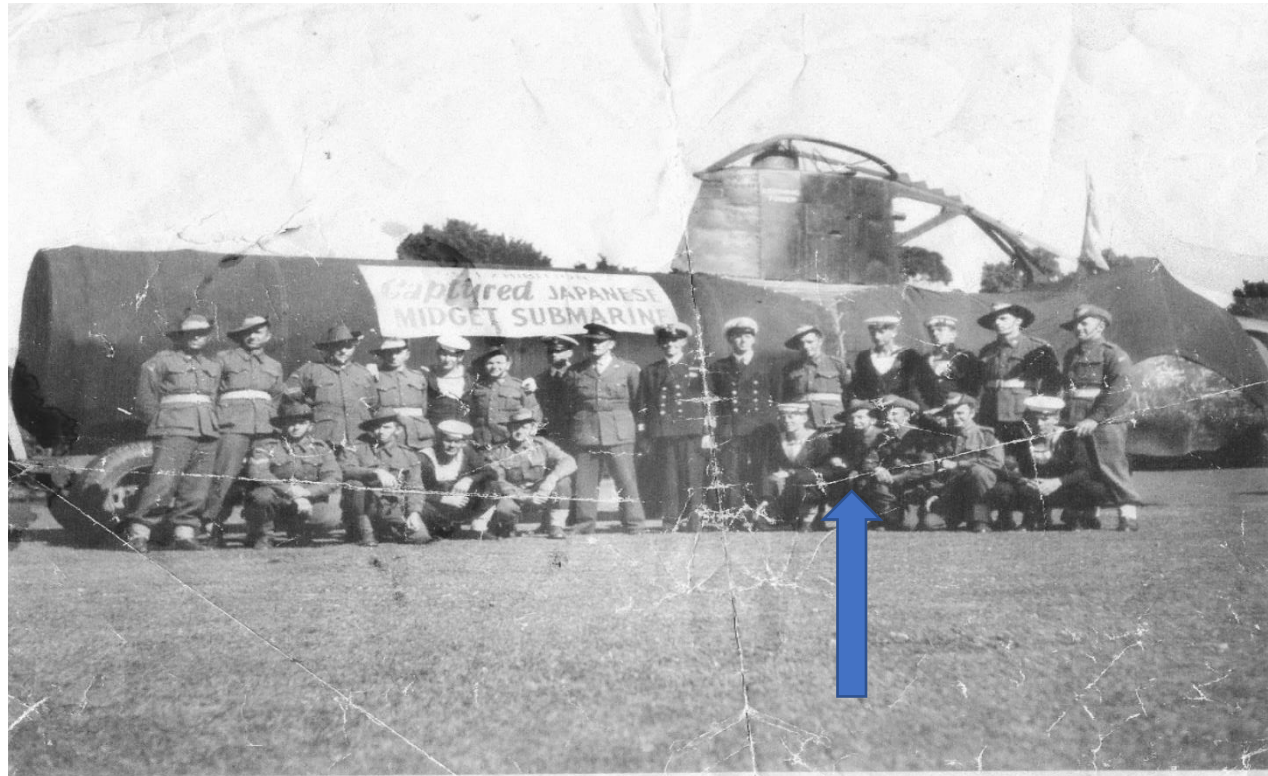
Australian sailors killed.

- A second entered the harbour and fired torpedoes at the cruiser USS Chicago.
- They missed the Chicago but one hit the barracks ship HMAS Kuttabul, killing 21 naval ratings.



War-time propaganda.

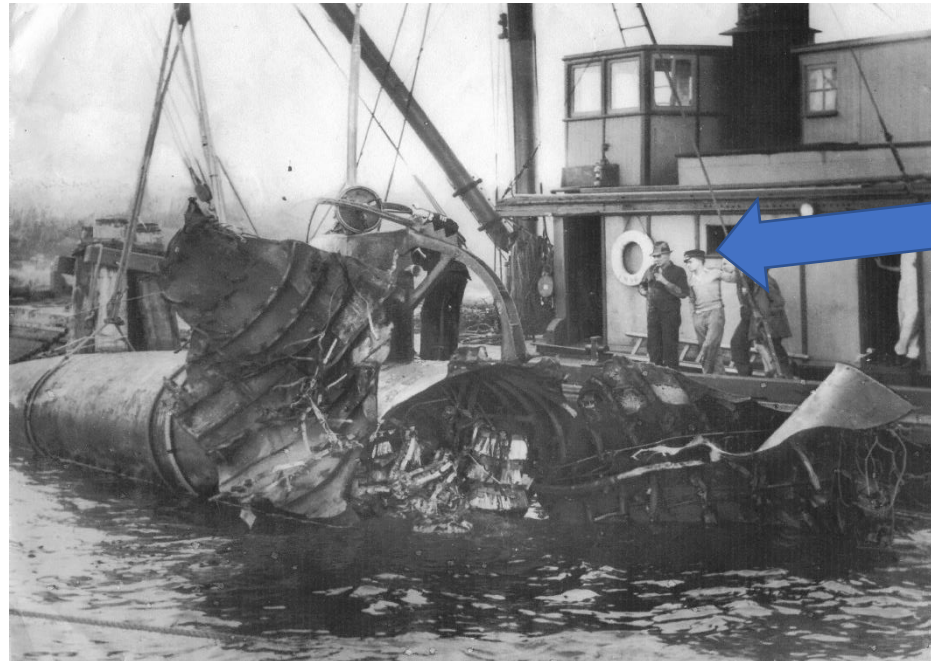
- This midget submarine disappeared, its fate a complete mystery until it was discovered by a group of amateur divers off Sydney's northern beaches in November 2006.
- Sergeant Diver
R.J. Leopold.



Is it this one?

A third midget submarine also entered the harbour but was destroyed by depth-charges before it had fired any torpedoes.

The submarine in the Memorial's collection is a composite of two that entered the harbour.



Sergeant Diver
R.J. Leopold.

Back to recalling our troops: two versions.

1. While the troops of the AIF 6th and 7th Divisions were on route to Australia, with most of their fighting equipment following them aboard slow-moving merchant ships, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, tried to divert them to Rangoon for use against the Japanese invaders of Burma.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Allegedly, when Churchill was told that the Japanese would take Australia, if the AIF were diverted, he said: "Let them take that island. We will take it back".



It is difficult to establish the truth.

- 2. After the fall of Singapore on 15th February 1942, Curtin asked Churchill to send the troops home to defend Australia from the steadily advancing Japanese.
- Instead, Churchill diverted the 7th Division towards Burma without first seeking Australian approval.
- Curtin was outraged.
- Top secret cables flashed between the two leaders.
- On Curtin's insistence, the ships turned away from Burma and Churchill finally agreed to their return to Australia.



The Battle of the Coral Sea (Wednesday 6th to Friday 9th May 1942).

- Together with major sea battles between the USA and Japan, such as The Battle of the Coral Sea (Wednesday 6th to Friday 9th May 1942), stopping the Japanese on the Kokoda Track ensured that Australia was not occupied by Japan.
- HMAS Australia (centre) under air attack on 7th May 1942.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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The imaginary "Brisbane Line".

- The "**Brisbane Line**" was a controversial defence proposal **supposedly** formulated during World War II to concede the northern portion of the Australian continent in the event of an invasion by the Japanese.
- Although a plan to prioritise defence the vital industrial regions between Brisbane and Melbourne in the event of invasion had been proposed in February 1942, it was rejected by Labour Prime Minister John Curtin and the Australian War Cabinet.



Controversial Eddie (did he care about security?).

- An incomplete understanding of this proposal and other planned responses to invasion led Labour minister Eddie Ward to publicly allege that the previous government (a United Australia Party-Country Party coalition under Robert Menzies and Arthur Fadden) had planned to abandon most of northern Australia to the Japanese.
- Ward continued to promote the idea during late 1942 and early 1943.



Lie upon lie.

- The idea that it was an actual defence strategy gained support after General Douglas MacArthur referred to it during a press conference in March 1943, where he also coined the term 'Brisbane Line'.
- Ward initially offered no evidence to support his claims, but later claimed that the relevant records had been removed from the official files.

Lang Labour MPs in 1935.

Ward is standing third from left.



Maybe Curtin and his cabinet decided Ward had too big a mouth to be trusted.

- A Royal Commission concluded that no such documents had existed, and the government under Menzies and Fadden had not approved plans of the type alleged by Ward.
- The controversy contributed to Labour's win in the 1943 federal election.



Ward was not rewarded for his deceit!

- Ward was assigned to minor portfolios thereafter.
- Ward served as Minister for Labour and National Service before being moved to Minister for Transport and Minister for External Territories in 1943.
- This was considered a demotion – Curtin pointed out that "the Army had the Transport and the Japs [Japanese] had the External Territories", leaving Ward with little to administer.

The RAAF had transport too.



Conscripts fighting on the Kokoda Track.

On 1st October 1941, the Australian Military Board issued an order re-raising the previously disbanded 24th/39th Battalion, as the 39th Battalion of the Australian Military Forces.

It consisted principally of militiamen (Citizen Military Forces) who were conscripted for national service.

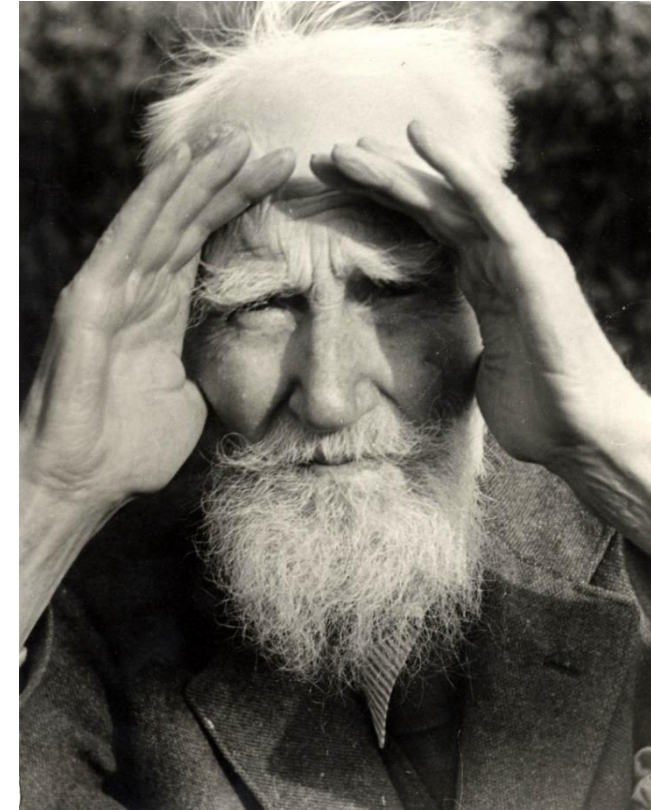
After several moves, within Australia and Papua they eventually found themselves fighting the Japanese on the Kokoda Track.

Kokoda village and airstrip 1942.



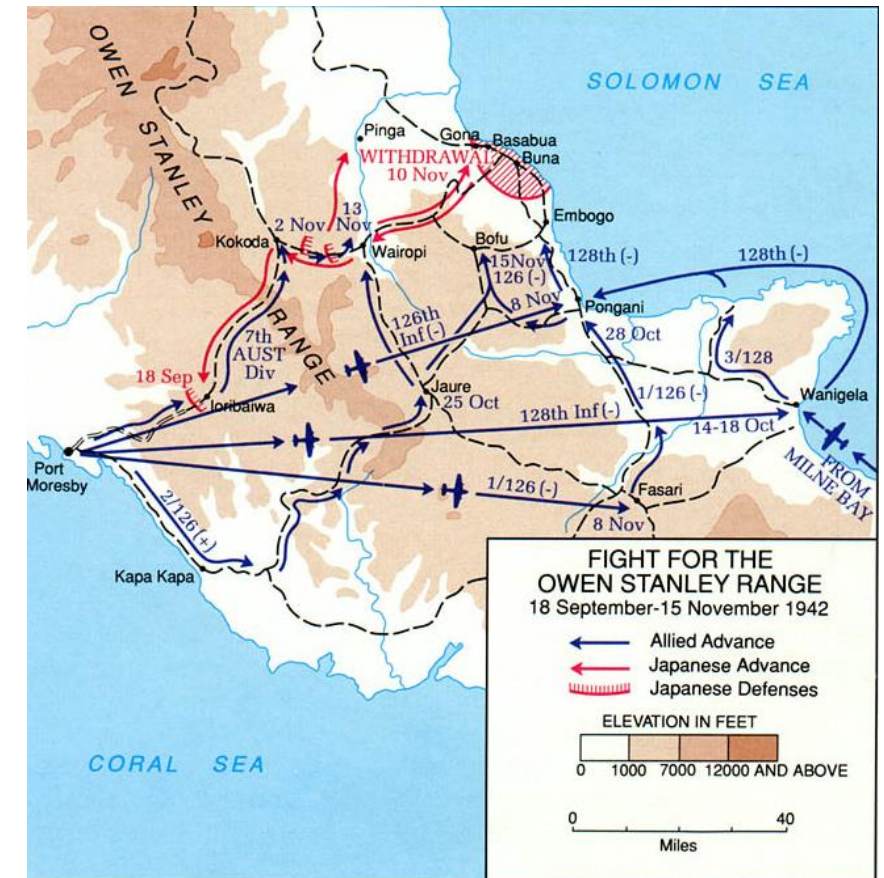
Treated with derision by AIF (Australian Imperial Forces) who were all volunteers.

- At first these young and ill-trained soldiers earned the pejorative nickname of 'chocos' or 'chocolate soldiers'.
- This term came from George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*, about a man who would not fight.
- It was first used during World War I about soldiers who had arrived in Egypt after Gallipoli.
- After their 'baptism of fire' at Kokoda and Milne Bay, however, the 'chocos' proved that they could fight as bravely and as well as the AIF.



After The Battle of the Coral Sea.

- The **Kokoda Track campaign** or **Kokoda Trail campaign(U.S.)** was part of the Pacific War of World War II.
- The campaign consisted of a series of battles fought between July and November 1942 between Japanese and Australian/Papuan forces in what was then the mandated Australian territory of Papua.



Result.

- The AIF was able to reinforce and relieve our militia forces (the so-called 'chocolate soldiers' or 'Chocos') who had halted the Japanese advance on the Kokoda Track in the Owen Stanley Ranges in Papua New Guinea.
- Statue in Brisbane, Australia of Raphael Aimbari, an Oro man, leading a blinded Australian soldier during the New Guinea Campaign.



What may have happened?

- Sir Robert Menzies, an empire loyalist, was Prime Minister when Britain declared war on Germany.
- His reaction was to also declare war.
- Who knows what would have happened if Labour were in power at the time.
- Menzies never explained why he resigned his captain's commission in Melbourne University Rifles at the outbreak of World War I.



A personal note.

- During World War II my mother talked a lot about a Captain Sam Templeton (aged 55), whom she knew and admired.
- Lieutenant Bert Kienzle blazed a new track in early August 1942 and it was he who named the point where it joined the old track "Templeton's Crossing" in memory of Captain Sam Templeton of the 39th Battalion, who was (presumed) captured and executed.
- There are a number of versions of what happened to Templeton.
- In one version, from Japanese intelligence reports, he told the Japanese they were facing 1,000 Australian troops, when in reality there were less than 100. This is thought to have slowed the Japanese advance and had a significant effect on the outcome of our war.