



World War II



Where Europe, North Africa, Asia, Middle East, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Mediterranean area

When 1939–1945

Why Germany had resented the loss of territories and wealth after its defeat in 1918. Under its Nazi government it seized back lost territory during the 1930s. Its invasion of Poland to grab land and resources pushed Britain and France into a situation where its expansion had to be stopped.

Outline of the conflict The war began with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. The Allies declared war against Germany, but little then happened. In 1940, however, the Germans overran most of western Europe with their Blitzkrieg ('Lightning War'), and began bombing Britain as a prelude to its invasion. The war also extended to an eastern front when Germany invaded Russia in June 1941.

In December 1941 Japan entered the war, and invaded most of Asia and much of the Pacific area. This brought the United States of America into the war.

In May 1945 Germany surrendered, and in August the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bringing about Japan's surrender.

Australian involvement The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) participated in operations against Italy after its entry into the war in June 1940. A small number of Australians flew in the Battle of Britain in August and September of the same year, but the Australian Army was not engaged in combat until 1941, when the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions joined Allied operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Following early successes against Italian forces, the Australians and other Allied forces suffered defeat at the hands of the Germans in Greece, Crete and North Africa. In June and July 1941 Australians participated in the successful Allied invasion of Syria, a mandate of France and ally of the Vichy (pro-German) government. Up to 14 000 Australians held out against repeated German attacks in the Libyan port of Tobruk, where they were besieged between April and August 1941. After being relieved at Tobruk, the 6th and 7th Divisions departed from the Mediterranean theatre for the war against Japan. The 9th Division remained to play an important role in the Allied victory at El Alamein in October 1942 before it, too, left for the Pacific. (By the end of 1942 the only Australians remaining in the Mediterranean theatre were airmen serving either with No. 3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) or in the Royal Air Force.)

Japan entered the war in December 1941 and swiftly achieved a series of victories which resulted in the occupation of most of South-East Asia and large areas of the Pacific by the end of March 1942. Singapore fell in February, with the loss by death or capture of an entire Australian division. After the bombing of Darwin that same month, all RAN ships in the Mediterranean theatre, as well as the 6th and 7th Divisions, returned to defend Australia.



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In March 1942, after the defeat of the Netherlands East Indies, Japan's southward advance began to lose strength, easing Australian fears that an invasion was imminent. The threat of invasion receded further as the Allies won a series of decisive battles: in the Coral Sea, at Midway, on Imita Ridge and the Kokoda Track, and at Milne Bay and Buna.

Further Allied victories against the Japanese followed in 1943. Australian troops were mainly engaged in land battles in New Guinea, the defeat of the Japanese at Wau and clearing Japanese soldiers from the Huon Peninsula—Australia's largest and most complex offensive of the war, not completed until April 1944. The Australian Army also began a new series of campaigns in 1944 against isolated Japanese garrisons stretching from Borneo to Bougainville; this involved more Australian troops than were used at any other time in the war. Australian troops were still fighting in Borneo when the war ended in August 1945.

While Australia's major effort from 1942 onwards was directed at defeating Japan, thousands of Australians continued to serve with the RAAF in Europe and the Middle East. Even though more Australian airmen fought against the Japanese, losses among those flying against Germany were far higher. Australians were particularly prominent in Bomber Command's offensive against occupied Europe. Some 3500 Australians were killed in this campaign, making it the costliest of the war.

In World War II over 39 000 Australians gave their lives, and 30 000 Australian servicemen and servicewomen were taken prisoner. Two-thirds of those taken prisoner were captured by the Japanese during their advance through South-East Asia in the first few weeks of 1942. While those who became prisoners of the Germans had a strong chance of returning home at the end of the war, one-third of prisoners of the Japanese died in captivity.

Nurses had gone overseas with the AIF in 1940, but during the early years of the war women were generally unable to make a significant contribution to the war effort in any official capacity. Labour shortages forced the Government to allow women to take a more active role in war work, and in February 1941 the RAAF received Cabinet approval to establish the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF). At the same time, the Navy also began employing female telegraphists, a breakthrough that eventually led to the establishment of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) in April 1941. The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) was established in October 1941 with the aim of releasing men from certain military duties in base units in Australia for assignment with fighting units overseas. Outside the armed services, the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA) was established to encourage women to work in rural industries; other women in urban areas took up employment in industries such as munitions production.

Statistics Almost a million Australians, both men and women, served in World War II. Over 39 000 Australian servicemen and women died as a result of the combat, including 8296 as prisoners of war.

Based on information from the Australian War Memorial website www.awm.gov.au