

CHALLENGING A DENIAL OF THE JAPANESE THREAT TO AUSTRALIA IN 1942 PROMOTED BY DR PETER STANLEY

Pacific War Historian James Bowen argues that denial by former senior Australian War Memorial historian Dr Peter Stanley of the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia throughout 1942 promotes a false history of Australia's most perilous year and diminishes the achievements and sacrifices of those who repulsed the deadly Japanese attacks on Australia and its Territories.

"The fall of Singapore can only be described as Australia's Dunkirk...The fall of Dunkirk initiated the Battle for Britain. The fall of Singapore opens the Battle for Australia."

The Honourable John Curtin, Prime Minister of Australia, (from his press release dated 16 February 1942).

"It seems to be that Australians want to believe that they were part of a war, that the war came close; that it mattered...Set against the prosaic reality, the desire is poignant and rather pathetic."

Australians may well think that this appalling comment by Dr Peter Stanley, former senior historian at the Australian War Memorial, diminishes and denigrates the sacrifices of those who fought to defend Australia against a grave threat from Japan in 1942 and insults Australians who honour those sacrifices. When he speaks dismissively of the deadly Japanese offensive against Australia in his essay ["Threat made manifest" \(2005\)](#), Dr Stanley is arguing that the only battles that really mattered in World War II occurred over his English birthplace during the Battle of Britain and on the continent of Europe.

"Now, we are told, the Australian Militia and AIF who met and defeated the Japanese in Papua were the men who saved Australia".

Dr Peter Stanley, former senior historian at the Australian War Memorial and self-styled "military social historian" now working at the National Museum of Australia, speaks dismissively of the Australian defence of the Kokoda Track in 1942 and the grave threat that Japanese occupation of Port Moresby would have created for Australia in ["Threat made manifest"](#).

"...there was no 'Battle for Australia', as such."

In this quote from his latest essay ["Was there a Battle for Australia" \(2006\)](#), published immediately prior to his sudden resignation from the Australian War Memorial, Dr Peter Stanley reveals a monumental ignorance of Japanese and American Pacific war strategies in 1942. Dr Stanley describes himself as "military social historian".



The Australian War Memorial at Canberra

Pacific War historian James Bowen argues that the national war memorial belongs to the people of Australia and not to its staff members. It is sacred ground; not a university campus. It should not be used as a platform from which its staff can express offensive, insulting, and strongly challenged personal views that lack sound historical foundation and are likely to cause deep offence to those who respect the wartime leadership of Prime Minister John Curtin and to diminish the achievements and sacrifices of those who died defending Australia from Japanese military aggression at places such as Sydney, Darwin, Broome, Rabaul, Timor, Ambon, Coral Sea, Kokoda, Milne Bay, the Beachheads, Wau, and Guadalcanal.

Dr Peter Stanley challenges the rationale for commemoration of a Battle for Australia 1942-43

Many Australians with an awareness of their country's history would be likely to know that Australia faced a grave threat from Japanese military aggression in 1942, and that many Australians died in fierce and bloody fighting to defend their country. The traditional view of Australian Pacific War historians affirms that Australia faced a grave threat from Japan throughout 1942 and until at least 7 February 1943*. However, Dr Peter Stanley, former senior historian at the Australian War Memorial, and self-styled "military social historian", has been turning that traditional view on its head since 2002 by claiming in a series of [essays](#) that Australia was **not** under grave threat from Japanese military aggression in 1942, and by suggesting that respected wartime Prime Minister John Curtin exaggerated the Japanese threat to Australia for political

advantage or because he had succumbed to the mental stresses of high political office in wartime. Dr Stanley [suggests](#) that Prime Minister Curtin may have lost touch with reality because of mental stress. Perhaps ignorant of the strategic importance attached to Australia by the Japanese high command and the US Navy, Dr Stanley claims in his essay "[Threat made manifest](#)" (2005) that the deadly Japanese attacks on Australia in 1942 did not matter in the broad context of World War II. Dr Stanley argues in that essay that the only battles that really mattered in World War II occurred over his English birthplace during the Battle of Britain and on the continent of Europe.

* When the Japanese acknowledged defeat in their strategic aim to isolate Australia and compel its surrender by withdrawing all of their troops from Guadalcanal.

Three of the quotations above the photograph are drawn from essays by Dr Peter Stanley and are [representative](#) of what I will show to be a false history of the threat from Japanese military aggression in 1942 promoted by Dr Stanley when he was senior historian at the Australian War Memorial and prior to his sudden move to the National Museum of Australia in 2007.

For convincing evidence that Dr Peter Stanley's rewriting of Australia's 1942 war history is deeply flawed, it is useful at this point to refer to the words of internationally respected Australian Pacific War historian, Professor David Horner:

"The Allied successes on the Kokoda Track, at Milne Bay, and on Guadalcanal ensured the security of Australia...If Port Moresby had been taken by General Horii's troops advancing over the Kokoda Track, the whole strategic situation would have been transformed. In that sense, Kokoda was the most important battle fought by Australians in the Second World War... during 1942 Australia was in great peril. The Allied policy of 'Beat Hitler First' meant that Australia faced the prospect of a Japanese invasion with only limited support from the United States."

From "[Defending Australia in 1942](#)" by Dr David Horner, Professor of Australian Defence History, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. The Japanese withdrawal from Guadalcanal in early February 1943 signalled the failure and end of Japan's strategic plan to force Australia to surrender. This Japanese strategic plan carried the code reference [Operation FS](#).

In a later chapter "[Proving that the Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942](#)", I will be demonstrating that it is Dr Peter Stanley who is out of touch with the reality of Australia's perilous strategic situation in 1942 and the dynamics of the Pacific War. Prime Minister John Curtin was very much in touch with the reality of the grave threat to Australia from Japan throughout 1942, and the stresses of leadership at this time almost certainly contributed to his untimely death before the end of the war. In the chapter "[Defending the character and leadership of Prime Minister John Curtin from unjustified slurs](#)", I will show that John Curtin's concerns about the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia throughout 1942 were shared by the tough chief of the US Navy, Admiral Ernest J. King, whose Pacific War strategy guided the Allies to victory against the Japanese.

From material published by Dr Peter Stanley since 2002, and **confirmed** by him in his third and latest essay "[Was there a Battle for Australia](#)" (2006), it appears that a driving purpose of this bizarre campaign of historical denial is to undermine national commemoration of the Battle for Australia 1942-43. Dr Stanley answered the question posed by his third essay with the blunt statement:

"..there was no 'Battle for Australia', as such."

National commemoration of the Battle for Australia 1942-43 began in 1999. The [commemoration](#) honours the achievements and sacrifices of those who repulsed the deadly Japanese attacks on Australia and its Territories in 1942, and it receives bipartisan support from Australia's political leaders and major veterans' organisations, including the Returned & Services League of Australia (RSL) which [initiated](#) the commemoration in 1997. The concept and scope of the Battle for Australia Commemoration, as accepted by the RSL, is explained in the next chapter "[What was the Battle for Australia 1942-43?](#)"

Speaking at the 1998 RSL National Congress, Prime Minister John Howard acknowledged the establishment of the Battle for Australia Commemoration with these words:

"..we support the efforts of the RSL and other ex-service organisations to establish a national profile for Battle for Australia commemorations to remember the perilous times of 1942 when Australia was under very real threat and when Australian troops landed the first decisive blow to Japan's apparent invincibility."

In making this bold public challenge to Prime Minister John Howard, the Australian Government, and the Australian Labor Party, Dr Peter Stanley has exposed to public scrutiny the soundness of his judgment.

As a graduate in Far Eastern history, specializing in Japanese history, and a Pacific War specialist for almost two decades, I find it difficult to take seriously anything that Dr Stanley says about the Battle for Australia or Australia's strategic situation in 1942. Dr Stanley is a self-styled military social historian* who appears to enjoy igniting controversy by tossing verbal hand grenades at Australia's revered war heroes and traditions** from behind the walls of the public institutions where he works, formerly the Australian War Memorial and now the National Museum of Australia. When doing so, Dr Stanley makes no secret of his English birth.

*Dr Stanley so described himself in an interview with "The Age" journalist Lucinda Schmidt on 17 December 2008. he also told her that he was not interested in "arid technical analysis" of battle strategy.

**See "Insulting the Gallipoli Anzacs" at:

http://www.battleforaustralia.org/battaust/AustInvasion/Anzacs_under_attack.html

In 2008, the Rudd Labor Government formally instituted by proclamation national commemoration of Battle for Australia Day on the first Wednesday in September

of each year. Battle for Australia Day now joins Anzac Day and Remembrance Day in the calendar of national commemorations.

Despite holding a senior appointment at the National Museum of Australia, Dr Peter Stanley saw fit to announce publicly through "The Australian" newspaper (26 June 2008):

"We are commemorating a battle which did not occur."

As a specialist Pacific War historian, the son of a Pacific War veteran, and one of the co-founders* in 1997 of the Battle for Australia Commemoration, I believe that it is appropriate for me to demonstrate that the denial by Dr Peter Stanley of the gravity of Australia's strategic situation in 1942 and his attacks on the character and leadership of Prime Minister John Curtin lack any credible historical foundation.

* The other co-founder was Major General W.B. Digger James, AC, MBE, MC.

To demonstrate the absence of any credible historical foundation for the denial by Dr Peter Stanley that there was a sustained and bloody battle for control of Australia and its New Guinea Territories from January 1942 to March 1943, a brief explanation of the rationale for commemoration of the Battle for Australia is provided in the next chapter ["What was the Battle for Australia 1942-43?"](#)

What does Dr Peter Stanley claim about Australia's strategic situation in 1942 and Prime Minister Curtin?

The primary source of what I regard as a demonstrably false history of the Japanese threat to Australia in 1942 appears to be Dr Peter Stanley, former senior historian at the Australian War Memorial*. In public speeches and three essays ["He's \(not\) coming South" \(2002\)](#), ["Threat made manifest" \(2005\)](#), and ["Was there a Battle for Australia" \(2006\)](#), Dr Stanley has made a number of extraordinary revisionist claims, including the following:

Revisionist Claim 1: There was no Japanese plan to invade Australia in 1942.

On this theme, Dr Stanley has said:

"There was no Japanese plan to invade Australia".

[Author's Note: This text is drawn from Dr Stanley's speech to the "Remembering 1942" conference held at the Australian War Memorial in 2002. These "author's notes" will be developed in the chapter ["Proving that Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942"](#)]

" By March 1942 the idea of an invasion of Australia had been dropped. It had never been more than an idea discussed by a handful of (middle-ranking naval staff) officers in Tokyo".

[Author's Note: These claims by Dr Peter Stanley are contradicted by the internationally recognised historian and Japan scholar Professor Henry Frei in his definitive history *Japans Southward Advance and Australia*, (1991) MUP, Melbourne, at pp. 160-174].

Revisionist Claim 2: Australia did not face a grave threat from Japan in 1942.

On this theme, Dr Stanley has written:

Australia's war in 1942 did not involve "deliverance from a Japanese threat".

Australians who want to believe that their country faced a grave threat from Japan in 1942 are" rather pathetic".

[Author's Note: These insensitive and insulting claims are made in Dr Stanley's essay ["Threat made manifest" \(2005\)](#). Their absurdity is immediately exposed by reference to the views (quoted above) of the internationally recognised Australian Pacific War historian, Professor David Horner. These claims will also be shown to be totally unjustified in the chapter ["Proving that Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942"](#)]

Revisionist Claim 3: The greatly outnumbered Australian Diggers who suffered very heavy casualties defeating the determined Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track towards Port Moresby do not deserve to be called "the men who saved Australia";

On this theme, Dr Stanley has written:

"Now, we are told, the Australian Militia and AIF who met and defeated the Japanese in Papua were the men who saved Australia".

[Author's Note: This dismissive and insulting claim is made by Dr Stanley in his essay ["Threat made manifest" \(2005\)](#). Dr Stanley fails to appreciate that Japanese occupation of Port Moresby would have exposed much of northern Australia to intensive Japanese bombing and facilitated the Japanese plan [\["Operation FS"\]](#) to compel Australia's surrender to Japan by intensified blockade and severing its vital lifeline to the United States]

"In fact, of course, there was no (Japanese) invasion; there was never going to be an invasion."

[Author's Note: Dr Stanley is wrong again. He has failed to appreciate that the whole of the bloody Kokoda Campaign was fought on soil that was Australian sovereign territory in 1942. See the chapter ["He was coming South - to compel Australia's surrender to Japan"](#)]

Revisionist Claim 4: The Japanese were not planning to make Australia part of their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

On this theme, Dr Stanley has said:

"The Japanese never planned to make Australia part of its Co-Prosperity Sphere (sic)."

[Author's note: This text is drawn from Dr Stanley's speech to the "Remembering 1942" conference held at the Australian War Memorial in 2002. Dr Stanley is wrong again. See the chapter ["Japan's hostile plans for Australia after surrender"](#)]

Revisionist Claim 5: Wartime Prime Minister John Curtin exaggerated the threat from Japan in 1942 for political gain or because he was unable to cope with the stress of office in wartime.

On this theme, Dr Stanley has said:

"Curtin is hailed as the 'Saviour of Australia'. He saved Australia from a threat that was never real, and he knew it."

[Author's note; This text is drawn from Dr Peter Stanley's introductory speech to the "Remembering 1942" conference at the Australian War Memorial in 2002. This outrageous claim is shown to be false and unfair in the chapters ["Proving that Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942"](#) and ["Defending the character and leadership of Prime Minister John Curtin from unjustified slurs"](#)]

"I'm arguing that there was in fact no invasion plan, that the Curtin government exaggerated the threat, and that the enduring consequence of its deception was to skew our understanding of the reality of the invasion crisis of 1942."

[Author's note: Ignoring historical evidence, Dr Peter Stanley speaks dismissively of the Japanese threat to Australia in 1942 and impugns the character and leadership of wartime Prime Minister John Curtin. The text is drawn from Dr Stanley's essay: ["He's \(not\) coming South - the invasion that wasn't" \(2002\)](#)]

"What explains Curtin's anxiety?..An actual danger of invasion had never existed...Why did Curtin continue to bang the invasion drum?...a deeper answer seems to lurk in Curtin's psyche...that he was unable to accept the reality."

Without any credible historical evidence to support this ridiculous and insulting accusation, Dr Stanley suggests that pressure of wartime leadership may have caused Prime Minister Curtin to become irrational and led to his exaggeration of the threat from Japan in 1942. From: ["He's \(not\) coming South - the invasion that wasn't" \(2002\)](#).

Revisionist Claim 6: There is no historical evidence that there was ever a battle for Australia in the literal sense, and it follows that commemoration of a Battle for Australia is nothing more than an emotional response to something that never happened.

On this theme, Dr Stanley has written:

"...there was no 'Battle for Australia' as such."

[Author's Note: This text is drawn from an official speech delivered by Dr Stanley at the Australian War Memorial in 2006. By taking this bizarre stance, Dr Stanley is denying clear historical evidence and challenging declared support for commemoration of the Battle for Australia 1942-43 from the Australian Government and all major Australian political parties]

There was no Japanese "grand plan" aimed at Australia in 1942;

Author's Note: Dr Stanley appears to be blissfully unaware that Japan's ["Operation FS"](#) was a "grand plan" intended to sever Australia's lifeline to the United States and employ intensified blockade and

psychological warfare to produce an Australian surrender to Japan. See the chapter ["Operation FS - The Japanese Army plan to "throttle Australia into submission to Japan in 1942"](#)]

The "author's notes" below each of these untrue revisionist claims by Dr Stanley will be fully developed in the chapter ["Proving that Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942"](#).

For those viewers who may have difficulty accessing Dr Stanley's essays on this theme, I have provided on this web-site a representative [sample](#) of his more controversial revisionist claims about Australia's strategic situation in 1942 and Prime Minister Curtin.

* "The Australian" of 2 January 2007 reports that Dr Peter Stanley, having applied successfully for a research appointment at the National Museum of Australia, resigned from the Australian War Memorial in December 2006. For the present, it appears that Dr Stanley has abandoned military social history as an occupation. I suspect that many Australians will be delighted by his career move.

[Forming a view that Dr Peter Stanley's denial of the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia in 1942 lacks credible historical foundation](#)

After reading Dr Peter Stanley's three essays on this theme, I formed the view that his denial of the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia throughout 1942 and his [attacks](#) on the character and leadership of Prime Minister John Curtin lacked any credible historical foundation and largely stemmed from inadequate knowledge of the Pacific War, and in particular, a failure by him to appreciate the grave strategic situation facing Australia throughout 1942. I also formed the view that Dr Peter Stanley did not have a sound grasp of the structure and functioning of Japan's [military high command](#) and its strategic aims and war planning in 1942 that would enable him to evaluate correctly its hostile plans for Australia.

I found that this lack of knowledge on the part of Dr Stanley was compounded by a number of major historical errors. I will mention the reasons for reaching these conclusions in the chapter ["Proving that Dr Peter Stanley is promoting a false history of 1942"](#) and related references.

I formed the view that Dr Peter Stanley's research was both superficial and deeply flawed. When I examined closely some references that Dr Stanley claimed as being supportive of his revisionism, it appeared to me that they either did not support his controversial views or contradicted them. I was appalled to read in his essay ["He's \(not\) coming South - the invasion that wasn't" \(2002\)](#) these words:

"I'm arguing that ***there was in fact no invasion plan***, that ***the Curtin government exaggerated the threat***, and that the enduring consequence of its deception was to skew our understanding of the reality of the invasion crisis of 1942...In the euphoria of victory early in 1942 ***some visionary middle-ranking naval staff officers*** in Tokyo proposed that Japan should go further. In February and March ***they proposed that Australia should be invaded***, in order to forestall it being used as a base for an Allied counteroffensive (which of course it became). ***The plans got no further than some***

acrimonious discussions. The Army dismissed the idea as 'gibberish', knowing that troops sent further south would weaken Japan in China and in Manchuria against a Soviet threat. Not only did the Japanese army condemn the plan, but the Navy General Staff also deprecated it, unable to spare the million tons of shipping the invasion would have consumed. By mid-March the proposal lapsed..... This conclusion is supported by all the scholarship, notably the late and much missed Henry Frei, whose "Japan's Southward Advance and Australia" documents the debate and its conclusion from Japanese official and private sources."

I have highlighted (by bold italics) nine significant historical errors and misstatements of fact in this short extract. It appeared to me that Dr Stanley's "conclusion" seriously misrepresented the published work of the distinguished historian and Japan scholar, Professor Henry Frei. To prove that this is so, I have analysed and explained Dr Stanley's errors by reference to the actual text of Professor Frei's definitive study of Japan's hostile plans for Australia in 1942 "[Japan's Southward Advance and Australia](#)". I have provided this analysis and evidence of Dr Stanley's errors in the earlier chapters "[Japan's navy proposes a limited invasion of the northern Australian mainland](#)", "[The Japanese Army rejects a limited invasion and demands full control of Australia](#)", and "[Operation FS - The Japanese Army plan to 'throttle Australia into submission' to Japan in 1942](#)".

Dr Stanley also sources as authority for his controversial views the work "[Midway - The Battle that doomed Japan](#)" by [Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya](#) (1955) US Naval Institute. Dr Stanley appeared to be unaware that this work by two World War II Japanese naval officers has little, if any, credibility in Japan where its authors stand accused of embellishing Fuchida's role in the attack on Pearl Harbor, and rewriting aspects of the Battle of Midway to minimise the shame of Japan's defeat. Any surviving credibility in the Western world was finally laid to rest by "Shattered Sword - The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway" by Parshall & Tully (2005) Potomac Books.

I find it significant that Dr Stanley avoided any reference to Professor Frei's authoritative work and the two Japanese navy authors Fuchida and Okumiya as being supportive of his revisionism in his third essay "[Was there a Battle for Australia](#)" (2006) .

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of Dr Peter Stanley's ignorance of the dynamics of the Pacific War in 1942, and lack of any historical frame of reference to support his revisionist denial of the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia in 1942, is his failure to mention in his essays three crucial factors that shaped the course of the Pacific War in 1942 and defined the nature and gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia in that year.

The first factor was the decision taken by Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt at the [Arcadia Conference](#) * to deny the defence of Australia priority status. The second factor was the top priority Japanese Pacific war plan [Operation FS](#) that was intended to isolate Australia from the United States and compel its surrender to Japan by intensified blockade and psychological warfare. The third factor was the US Navy's "[Pacific War](#)

[Campaign Plan](#)" which evolved from the Arcadia Conference and was substantially shaped by it. Despite the constraints placed on US Navy operations in the western Pacific by Churchill and Roosevelt at [Arcadia](#), Admiral Ernest King was determined to use, and place at risk, what remained of his Pacific Fleet after Pearl Harbor to save Australia and the lower Solomon Islands from Japanese occupation. His motivation was not affection for either country, but an appreciation that they needed to be preserved as launching pads for American counter-offensives against Japan.

* At the Arcadia Conference held in Washington in late December 1941, Churchill persuaded Roosevelt to adopt an Allied war strategy that accorded top priority to defeating Germany and relegated the South-West Pacific (including British Malaya and Australia) to the status of a secondary war theatre. Churchill's next priorities after the defence of the British Isles were the Middle East, India, Burma, and Russia. Churchill appreciated that the "Germany First" war strategy would put Australia, British Malaya, the Philippines, and the rest of South-East Asia at serious risk of Japanese occupation but he felt that these countries could, if occupied by Japan, be liberated from Japanese control after Germany had been defeated.

I found the tenor and tone of Dr Peter Stanley's essays on this sensitive theme very disturbing. It appeared to me that he wrote them without due regard for the position that he held in the national war memorial and with the intention of being provocative, confrontational, and controversial. I believe that the last three quotations at the beginning of this chapter serve to illustrate my point. They have been drawn from a representative [sample](#) of Dr Stanley's more controversial claims. I regard them as offensive to Australians, lacking historical foundation, and deeply insulting to the memory of those who fought, and especially those who died, in the bloody battles in defence of Australia from sustained Japanese attacks throughout 1942. Dr Stanley's English birth, after World War II, may serve to explain his dismissive attitude to the deadly Japanese attacks on Australia in 1942 but do not excuse revisionism that many Australians are likely to view as lacking historical foundation and utterly bizarre.

In the chapters that follow, I will explain for the benefit of Dr Peter Stanley the rationale for commemoration of the Battle for Australia. I will refute the revisionist claims of Dr Peter Stanley about Australia's 1942 war history and Prime Minister John Curtin. Finally, it will be necessary for me to examine the question whether it was inappropriate for Dr Peter Stanley to use the national war memorial as a platform to express highly controversial and questionable views on sensitive historical issues. Dr Peter Stanley has resigned and left the Memorial, but it appears to me that the problem remains unresolved while he continues, as a senior public servant, to state publicly that he denies that anything occurred in 1942 that justifies the description Battle for Australia; denies the gravity of the Japanese threat to Australia in 1942; and declines to withdraw the baseless attacks that he has made on the character and leadership of Prime Minister Curtin.

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