PARLIAMENTARY
LIBRARY

INFORMATION   ANALYSIS   ADVICE

QUICK GUIDE

3 APRIL 2017

Anzac Day 2017

A quick guide to military anniversaries in 2017

David Watt
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section

In February 2017, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs announced a list of significant anniversary dates which will be the focus of commemoration during 2017. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) website provides, where known, further information about the location and nature of the commemorative activities. The DVA Anzac webpage also enables a search of local events within Australia. The following anniversaries are based on the list set out by the Minister.

15 February 2017—75th anniversary of the Fall of Singapore

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described the Commonwealth defeat at Singapore on 15 February 1942 as 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'. In just over two months, Japanese forces managed to defeat Commonwealth forces along the Malaysian Peninsula and invade and occupy the 'Gibraltar of the East', the British Empire's main base in Southeast Asia.

In Singapore alone, 80,000 Commonwealth troops (the vast majority of which were British, Indian and Australian) became prisoners of war. A further 40,000 Commonwealth troops had been captured in the fighting on the Malay Peninsula.

Approximately 15,000 Australians (most of the 8th Division) were captured in Singapore. As many as 7,000 of those would die before the end of the war.

More detailed information on the Malayan and Singapore campaigns can be found in the digitised version of Australia's Official War History; see chapters 7 to 17 of *Volume IV—The Japanese thrust*.

19 February 2017—75th anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin

A few days after the Fall of Singapore, with Australia reeling over the loss of that island and the 8th Division, Darwin was bombed by Japanese aircraft. On 19 February 1942, approximately 240 Japanese planes attacked Darwin in two separate raids, killing at least 243 civilians and Australian and US military personnel, and sinking eight ships in Darwin Harbour.

This was the first of many attacks on the Australian mainland during the war, but the most damaging. There were in total some 97 air raids that occurred over northern Australia during 1942 and 1943. Prime Minister Curtin said at the time of the initial bombing that a 'severe blow has been struck on Australian soil'.

The largest loss of life was on the American destroyer USS *Peary*—of its crew of 144, 91 lost their lives. The USS *Peary* Memorial in Darwin commemorates the US personnel that went down with the *Peary.*

On 18 November 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced that 19 February would be proclaimed as 'Bombing of Darwin Day', to 'ensure the attacks across Australia's north are appropriately remembered and commemorated every year'. The first Bombing of Darwin day was held on 19 February 2012, and the Prime Minister and Minister for Veterans' Affairs attended the commemorative services.

11 April 2017—centenary of the Battle of Bullecourt

During the broader Arras Offensive (April–June 1917) Australian forces played a central role in the First and Second Battles of Bullecourt. Between February and April 1917, German forces on the Western Front withdrew to a defensive line known to British forces as the Hindenburg Line.

On 11 April 1917, the Australian 4th Division and British 62nd Division attacked German positions either side of the village of Bullecourt, attempting to capture Hindenburg Line trenches. This attack was made with the support of a small number of British tanks, rather than with the customary preliminary artillery barrage of enemy positions. All the tanks were out of action within a couple of hours, and while some trenches were captured, they could not be held, and Australian troops were driven back by midday. Casualties were very high— the 4th Division suffered 3,300 casualties on this day alone.

A second attempt was made to capture Hindenburg Line trenches around Bullecourt between 3 and 17 May. Australian troops seized and held some parts of the Hindenburg Line and the British 62nd Division captured the village of Bullecourt on 17 May. Three Australian Divisions (the 1st, 2nd and 5th) took part in the two weeks of fighting at Bullecourt, and suffered a total of 7,000 casualties. Bullecourt is now home to the Australian Memorial Park.

25 April 2017—Anzac Day

Anzac Day 2017 will be commemorated at services to be held in Canberra at the Australian War Memorial, and at Gallipoli and Villers-Bretonneux. It will be 102 years since the Gallipoli landings.

4 May 2017—75th anniversary of the Battle of Coral Sea

The Battle of the Coral Sea occurred off the northeast coast of Australia in early May 1942. It was the first fleet action where aircraft carriers engaged each other, but none of the opposing vessels ever sighted or fired directly on each other. The Allies lost several ships, including the fleet carrier USS *Lexington*. However, the damage sustained by Japanese carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* prevented those ships from participating in the decisive Battle of Midway in June 1942. Since it also thwarted Japanese plans to occupy Port Moresby by sea, it came to be seen as an important moment in the war.

Australian involvement consisted of the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia* (II) and the light cruiser HMAS *Hobart* (I), both of which were attacked by Japanese aircraft on 7 May, without damage. Japan subsequently attempted to capture Port Moresby using an overland route, leading to the Kokoda Campaign.

The Royal Australian Navy's website contains a summary of the Battle of the Coral Sea in which HMAS *Australia* was the Flagship of the Support Group (TG 17.3) patrolling the Jomard Passage.

4 June 2017—75th anniversary of Bomber Command Operations

This year is the 75th anniversary of the commencement of the Royal Australian Air Force squadrons' operations with Bomber Command.

Approximately 10,000 Australians served with Bomber Command during the Second World War. The very high numbers of civilian deaths in German cities such as Hamburg and Dresden has meant that the role of Bomber Command (and the Australians who fought in it) has always been controversial, with an official memorial in the UK not unveiled until 2012. Bomber crews themselves sustained very high casualty numbers throughout the war. Some 3,486 Australians were killed flying as a part of Bomber Command, with a further 650 dying in training accidents.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs has announced a $50,000 grant to assist veterans' travel to Canberra for the commemoration on 4 June. The commemoration will be held at the Australian War Memorial's Bomber Command Memorial.

25 August 2017—75th anniversary of the Battle of Milne Bay

Japanese forces landed at Milne Bay in eastern Papua on 25 August 1942. Expecting light defences, they were confronted by 9,000 Allied troops (mostly of the 7th and 18th Infantry Brigades). Japanese forces withdrew by 7 September, and Milne Bay is considered to be the first decisive defeat of a Japanese land attack in the war. The battle cost 167 Australian, 14 American, and at least 700 Japanese lives.

3 September 2017—Merchant Navy Day

In a media release marking Merchant Navy Day in 2016, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs stated that 'memorials around Australia record the more than 600 Australian merchant mariners known to have lost their lives in war, however there are likely more unknown because some Australians served in the merchant navies of allied nations'.

The 3 September was chosen because it was the date on which the British Commonwealth entered the Second World War (in 1939) and on that same day, the first merchant ship to be lost in that war, SS *Athenia*, was torpedoed, with loss of lives. Australia has been recognising 3 September as Merchant Navy Day since 2007.

On 7 October 1990, Governor-General Bill Hayden unveiled the Merchant Navy Memorial on the shores of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin.

6 September 2017—Battle for Australia Day

Battle for Australia Day was proclaimed by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs on 26 June 2008. In his media release the Minister stated that 'the first Wednesday in September has been chosen by the veteran community as it represents the first defeat of Japanese forces on land in the Battle of Milne Bay'.

In 'A Japanese invasion' (*Wartime*, 77, January 2017), the Australian War Memorial's Steven Bullard reviews the evidence concerning Japan's intentions towards Australia during the Second World War. He concludes that although the possibility of invasion was discussed at senior levels within the Japanese military, it was never accepted as a realistic possibility.

14 September 2017—70th anniversary of Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers

Australia's first peacekeeping operation occurred in 1947, when military observers were sent to Indonesia under the banner of the United Nations (UN) to monitor the ceasefire between Dutch colonial and Indonesian independence forces. Since then, Australian military, police and some civilians have served on more than 50 peacekeeping missions. A commemorative service is held at the Australian Peacekeeping Memorial on Anzac Parade in Canberra.

26 September 2017—centenary of the Battle of Polygon Wood

This year's 100th anniversary of the Battle of Polygon Wood will be commemorated with a Dawn Service at Buttes New British Cemetery. The Fifth Australian Division Memorial is located at Polygon Wood.

23 October 2017—75th anniversary of the Battle of El Alamein and the culmination of the North Africa campaigns

The Second Battle of El Alamein is regarded as the turning point in the war in North Africa. Following the initial success in the Western Desert Campaign (December 1940–February 1941), Commonwealth forces were forced back into Egypt by Rommel's Afrika Korps. On 23 October 1942, the Commonwealth 8th Army (which included the Australian 9th Division) launched its counter-attack, known as the Second Battle of El Alamein. By the time the battle ended on 11 November, a total of 2,350 Commonwealth troops had been killed (620 Australians), but the North African campaign had turned decisively in the Allies' favour. On 13 May 1943, Axis forces surrendered in Tunisia, ending the North African Campaign.

31 October 2017—centenary of the Battle of Beersheba

On 31 October 1917, the Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade led the charge that broke through the Turkish defences and captured the town of Beersheba (Be'er Sheva). The *Official History of World War I* (Volume VII, the AIF in Sinai and Palestine, chapter XXII—the eve of Beersheba and chapter XXIII—the Battle of Beersheba) covers the events in some detail.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba and there will be some commemorative events hosted at the site by the Australian Light Horse Association and writer and historian, Kelvin Crombie. Events include a re-enactment of the light horse charge and the official opening of the Light Horse Museum.

Commemorations will also be held at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Be'er Sheva, the Turkish memorial, and the Park of the Australian Soldier.

2 November 2017—75th anniversary of the Kokoda Campaign and the Beachheads

The iconic Kokoda Trail Campaign began when Japanese forces landed unopposed at Gona, on the northern coast of Papua, on 21 July 1942. Having had its plans to attack Port Moresby by sea disrupted by the Battle of the Coral Sea, Japan sought to test the overland route from Gona to Port Moresby, utilising the Kokoda Trail.

As the Japanese forces advanced towards the village of Kokoda, they were met initially by the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the Australian 39th Infantry Battalion (Militia). Outnumbered, the Australians and Papuans basically fought a fighting retreat over the Owen Stanley Ranges for the next two months, fighting delaying actions at Kokoda, Deniki, Isurava, Efogi, and Ioribaiwa Ridge.

Australian forces, now being reinforced by experienced Australian Imperial Force units, retreated as far south as Imita Ridge, just 40 kilometres from Port Moresby. Here they dug in, expecting a Japanese assault. The attack never came, and the tactical situation had swung in the Australians' favour: their artillery at Ower's Corner could now fire on the Japanese positions, and Australian supplies could be trucked most of the way to the front, while Japanese supplies had to be carried on foot almost the entire length of the trail.

Japanese forces began to retreat along the Kokoda Trail at the end of September 1942. They were pursued by Australian soldiers (mostly of the 25th and 16th Brigades) who won battles at Eora and Oivi-Gorari. The Australians continued their attack on 23 September, and on 2 November, ultimately retook Kokoda village itself. By 18 November, Australian forces had crossed the Kumusi River at Wairopi, effectively ending the Kokoda Campaign. Following their defeat at Oivi-Gorari, Japanese forces withdrew to the beachheads at Gona and Buna, thereby ending the wider Kokoda Trail Campaign and paving the way for the Australian and American attacks on Buna, Gona and Sanananda.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs website *The Kokoda Track*, written by military historian Peter Williams, provides detailed information on the Kokoda Campaign, including interactive maps of the main battles. The number of Australians killed during the Kokoda Campaign is generally estimated to be about 600. Peter Williams provides more precise figures, breaking the casualties down by service.

11 November 2017—Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day is the anniversary of the armistice which ended the First World War (1914–18). It is set aside as a day to remember the sacrifice of those who have died for Australia in all wars and conflicts. It was originally known as Armistice Day.

For a history of how Armistice Day became Remembrance Day see J Amess, 'A day of remembrance: 11 November', *Sabretache*, 24, April–June 1983, pp. 25–26.

For further information, see the Parliamentary Library publication *Remembrance Day 2008—the 90th Anniversary of the End of World War I* (November 2008).