

# THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AND VICTORY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Iain E. Johnston-White



Studies in Military and Strategic History Series



# Studies in Military and Strategic History

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Iain E. Johnston-White

The British  
Commonwealth and  
Victory in the Second  
World War

palgrave  
macmillan

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Studies in Military and Strategic History

ISBN 978-1-137-58916-3 ISBN 978-1-137-58917-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58917-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016959443

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Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

The registered company address is: The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW,  
United Kingdom

## FOREWORD

The general historiography of the Second World War allots the British white dominions minor walk-on parts, overshadowed as they are by the principal players—Britain, the USA, the USSR, Germany, Italy and Japan. Similarly, the histories of the British decolonisation pay scant attention to the ‘de-dominionisation’ which preceded it in the ‘white’ Commonwealth, the British Empire’s hard core. While recent ‘British World’ historiography has reclaimed some of the ground in imperial history, until now, with this superb book by Iain Johnston-White, we have not had a thorough, measured study of the role of the Dominions in the Second World War.

Taking up the hard questions about the ‘sinews of war’—finance, supply, training, military muscle—Johnston-White not only demonstrates that the Dominions played very important roles in all four key areas, but that, in the years before the USA entered the war and for some time afterwards, their combined contribution was critical to Britain’s holding on. Broadly speaking, about a third of the ‘British’ effort came from the Dominions. This is a significant finding for any one of the areas mentioned; doing so for all four amounts to a historiographical revolution in our knowledge of the underpinnings of British grand strategy. Johnston-White’s book offers a startling new reinterpretation, indeed a fundamental reorientation, of our understanding of how Britain and its empire survived in the early, crucial years of the Second World War.

Working from an impressive multi-national archival base (in four Dominions and Britain), Johnston-White investigates the weight Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa brought to bear. On the financial side, he demonstrates the crucial function, in descending order, of

Canadian dollars, South African gold, and Australian and New Zealand sterling balances in propping up the British position. The Canadian Billion Dollar Gift and more, and South Africa's gold production and reserves, kept Britain afloat financially until the USA was ready politically to embark on Lend-Lease. On the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, he shows that fully 46 per cent of Britain's pilots and 41 per cent of air crew (staggering figures not before aggregated in this way), came from the four Dominions. The empire was rich in highly trained engineers and technicians who came to Britain's rescue. Think of Fighter and Bomber Command without them! On shipping and supplying Britain and the war theatres from across the oceans, he proves the vital roles of Canada's navy and Canada's and South Africa's ports. And finally, in the war in the Western Desert, Rommel's Afrika Korps could not have been held and then pushed back without the Dominion infantry, who very disproportionately fought and died to achieve victory there.

Johnston-White shows that the Dominions–Metropole relationship in many ways was symbiotic; for instance, domestic British forces provided the 'tail' that made the Dominions' 'teeth' possible. More important, he concludes that these actions and contributions were not at base altruistic, or even sentimental, but founded upon mutual self-interest. (Occasionally these even pulled in contrary directions, as when Australia returned its two divisions to the Pacific, Canada refused to send troops to the Middle East, and South Africa stuck to strict business principles and to a regional role.) Both Canada's and South Africa's economies grew markedly, and the Pacific Dominions security interests were served, until the USA was prepared to take up the slack. The Commonwealth Alliance had a vital element of overseas Britishness. This is the most important work on the empire at war for a generation.

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## PREFACE

In this book I weave together two hugely important parts of twentieth century historiography: the Second World War and the British Empire. The transformation of the UK—from standing ‘alone’ against the rampant Axis powers in the summer of 1940 to a victorious Allied nation in 1945—has been the focus of much debate. Scholars have explained victory in terms of advancing technology, improved military doctrine and the weight of the UK’s major allies, the USA and the Soviet Union. Imperial history tends to bypass the question of victory, focusing instead on the Second World War as the necessary precursor to the end of empire, because of the conflict’s role in undermining ‘subaltern’ relationships between European colonial powers and the countries they occupied. These two familiar narratives both exclude a crucial dimension: the importance of the UK’s settler-colonies. The British Dominions—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa—were foundational to British world power and experienced an exceptional form of decolonisation. By reinterpreting the Dominion experience during the Second World War, I contribute to debates on alliance warfare and British victory in the conflict, while adding to the discussion of the importance of empire—and specifically settler-colonies—in twentieth-century historiography.

The UK could not have won the war without the Dominions. Through four case studies, I demonstrate the key areas where Dominion support was indispensable to the British war effort. The resources that the Dominions provided expanded the scope of British strategy and greatly facilitated the imperial war machine on multiple levels—finance, training, supply and on the battlefield itself. The nature and extent of these efforts



were intimately tied to the fact that the Dominions were former settler-colonies that shared common interests, close political bonds and British culture with the UK. I examine this group of nations, often referred to as ‘the Commonwealth alliance’, fighting a total war: 1939–1945 was a pivotal moment when the Dominions were at the height of their importance to the UK and to the maintenance of British world power; yet the process of fighting such an intense conflict conversely facilitated the ultimate separation of the ‘old’ Commonwealth through the development of nationhood in the Dominions. This paradox within the traditional narrative suggests that full Dominion decolonisation followed necessarily from the Second World War; however, in this book I will demonstrate that the uniquely intimate Anglo-Dominion ties which made victory possible had not dissipated by the end of the war. Post-war separation was by no means inevitable.

I have separated the text into four broad case studies, to capture both the diverse nature of the Dominion effort and the magnitude of total war. Through an examination of how the war effort was financed, the global training of cadets for the air war, the demands and limitations of merchant shipping and supply, and the fighting of the ground war in North Africa, I demonstrate the fundamental importance of the Dominions to British victory. I draw on archival resources in London, Pretoria, Canberra, Wellington and Ottawa, reflecting a transnational approach to the analysis that mirrors the global nature of the Commonwealth alliance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I received a lot of help and guidance while writing this book. First, I would like to thank my research supervisor, Professor David Reynolds, who was a consistent source of advice, constructive criticism and support throughout my PhD, upon which this book is based, and the MPhil before it. I am grateful that I have been able to work under his supervision for five years at Christ's College. I must also thank Professor George Peden, who started me on the graduate study path and has continued to take an interest in my work.

Professor Ashley Jackson, Professor Carl Bridge and Dr Tim Harper read the manuscript and provided very useful insights that have helped to develop my research. Several people have also taken the time to read through chapter and article drafts, which was most helpful and greatly appreciated: Dr Marcus Faulkner and Dr Steve Marti. The following academics were all generous enough to take the time to meet with me, discuss my project and offer advice that has helped to shape the manuscript: Professor Joan Beaumont, Professor Tim Cook, Sebastian Cox, Dr Kynan Gentry, Gerald Hensley, Professor Norman Hillmer, Professor David Horner, Dr Hector Mackenzie, Dr Ian McGibbon, Dr Garth Pratten and Dr John Subritzky. I would also like to thank my frequent conference panel members and friends, Dr Eirik Brazier, Dr Jatinder Mann, Dr Tyler John and Dr Steve Marti. I am especially grateful to Rachel Johnston-White for taking the time to read, and help edit, the entire book, which has proven invaluable. I am grateful for the warm welcome from my new colleagues in the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University, where I have finished this project.

I am indebted to Christ's College for providing me with the platform to complete this research. For much of the past five years, Christ's has been my home, an important source of funding for overseas travel and research, the centre of my social life in Cambridge, and most recently my wedding venue! I am very grateful to the friends I have made and colleagues I have met in college, who have helped me to thoroughly enjoy my time in Cambridge. More recently at Sciences Po Paris, I also benefitted from working with many great people, including Professors Elissa Mailänder and Guillaume Piketty.

I appreciate the friendly and helpful archivists at the following archives: National Archives of Australia, Australian War Memorial, Library and Archives Canada, Queen's University Archives (Kingston), Archives New Zealand, Department of Defence Documentation Centre South Africa, National Archives of South Africa, South African Department of Foreign Affairs and The National Archives. Good archivists make research such as this possible—and even enjoyable!

I would have been unable to complete my research without the support of numerous funding bodies. The Cambridge Home and European Scholarship Scheme provided me with the funding to pursue my PhD. The Smuts Memorial Fund generously supported my research trips to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, for which I am very appreciative. Other funding bodies that provided essential financial assistance: at Christ's—Christ's Research Fund, The Emily & Gordon Bottomley Travel Fund, The Monica Kornberg Memorial Fund and the Reuben Levy Travel Fund; through the Faculty of History—Conference Attendance Fund, Holland Rose Fund and the Kathleen Hannay Memorial Fund; externally—British Association of Canadian Studies, Royal Historical Society, Canadian Historical Association and the German Historical Institute (Paris).

My deepest appreciation and gratitude are for my wife Rachel and my family, who are my constant source of love and support in all my endeavours.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

2NZE	2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
Anzac	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
BCATP	British Commonwealth Air Training Plan
BDG	Billion Dollar Gift
CAB	Cabinet Office papers
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CWC	Cabinet War Committee
DO	Dominions Office
EAC	Economic Advisory Committee
EATS	Empire Air Training Scheme
EFTS	Elementary Flying Training School
FO	Foreign Office
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOC-in-C	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
JATS	Joint Air Training Scheme
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
L of C	Line of Communication
MEC	Middle East Command
OTU	Operational Training Unit
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RCN	Royal Canadian Navy

RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RN	Royal Navy
RNVR	(SA) Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (South African)
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
RNZN	Royal New Zealand Navy
SAAF	South African Air Force
SANF	South African Naval Force
SANS	South African Naval Service
SDF	Seaward Defence Force
SFTS	Service Flying Training School
SWPA	South-West Pacific Area
TNA	The National Archives
UDF	Union Defence Force
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WDF	Western Desert Force
WO	War Office
WS	Winston's Special



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## Introduction

### ‘GREAT COMMUNITIES FAR BEYOND THE OCEANS BUILT ON OUR CIVILIZATION’: THE ROLE OF THE DOMINIONS IN BRITISH VICTORY, 1939–1945

At the head of the alliance for most of the Second World War was British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.<sup>1</sup> Churchill painted a contradictory picture of the role that the Dominions played in British victory during and after the war. His rhetorical flourishes in turn created an island alone against the world and an island at the centre of an international alliance, based around the English-speaking peoples. Within this lingual association lay a community ‘of British blood from home and from the Dominions’, an intimate alliance spread across four continents and built on adopted models of British governance and society.<sup>2</sup> Churchill placed the UK centre stage, while the Dominions became increasingly marginalised adjuncts to British power in the volumes of his history, portrayed as largely loyal supporters but occasionally unhelpful distractions.<sup>3</sup>

This captures just one perspective of the Commonwealth relationship, but I seek to deal with the elements that Churchill and many others left unsaid. Although London was where imperial diplomacy was most frequently conducted and where Commonwealth strategy was made, the Dominions generated a great portion of the resources—particularly through additional manpower, but also in services, finance and materials—to pursue the strategy being formulated. The imperial capital was the hub of the alliance, but the periphery was spread across the globe in

North America, the southern tip of the African continent and the South Pacific, giving the ‘British nations’ considerable geographic reach. That the Dominions were contributing on a tremendous scale to the war was not left in doubt even in Churchill’s narrative, but the vast importance—indeed, the sheer necessity—of this contribution is rarely recognised outside individual Dominions, and then often in narrowly nationalist terms.

### AN EXTRA-IMPERIAL RELATIONSHIP: THE UK AND ITS DOMINIONS

Interpreting the extent of the Dominion contribution and the UK’s reliance on Dominion support requires an understanding of how the Anglo-Dominion imperial relationships developed. In the nineteenth century, the example set by the rebellious USA, the so-called ‘errant Dominion’ by some later accounts,<sup>4</sup> convinced the UK to hand its remaining settler-colonies increasing powers of self-governance. This was first introduced to separate Canadian colonies in 1848. Colonies in Oceania, both New Zealand and territories in Australia, gained similar self-governance in 1856. Canada was born from the union of several North American settler-colonies in 1867 and named a British Dominion, as a distinction for taking a constitutional step beyond being a patchwork of self-governing settler-colonies to a single entity of significant size,<sup>5</sup> while remaining within the empire. Australian colonies federated in 1901. In 1907 New Zealand, having refused union with Australia, gained independent Dominion status alongside Australia, marking their constitutional development and creating a coherent Dominion group distinguishable within the framework of British imperial power. The process in South Africa was less direct: during the Boer War, 1899–1902, the two British South African colonies fought two independent Afrikaner colonies—the British imperial armies employing many thousands of men from Canada, Australia and New Zealand in the process—before British Empire forces secured control over all four territories.<sup>6</sup> Out of the search for a diplomatic settlement to the strained British–Afrikaner relationship, a democratic and self-governing Union of South Africa was formed as a British Dominion in 1910.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the UK and its Dominions formed the British Commonwealth of Nations, an imperial group that existed within an empire from which it often stood apart.

To varying extents, the settler-colonies-turned-Dominions shared key features. They were reliant in their early history on financial investment and immigrants (or settlers) from the UK for economic and demographic

growth. Their economies, lacking the population density and resource development for significant industrialisation, were based on agriculture and the export of primary products and raw materials back to the UK; many of the manufactured items and consumer products available in the Dominions were in turn imported from the ‘mother country’. Parliamentary systems, despite the federal nature of several Dominions, were based on the British model. Armed forces were raised to fight within the British imperial army, navy and, from the Great War, the air force as well.<sup>8</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large proportions of the Dominion populations were ‘off the boat’ from the UK or had a parent or parents who were born in the British Isles. Beyond the blood ties to the UK, ‘Britishness’ encompassed cultural and political identities as well, allowing some non-British European immigrants to share in British imperial citizenship and participate in building these new nations.

The Boer War demonstrated that men from the settler-colonies would fight for the British Empire in the UK’s wars. Volunteers from Australia, New Zealand and Canada willingly responded to London’s call. The Great War put the point beyond debate: over one million men from the Dominions fought overseas, most of them volunteers fighting in the trenches of the Western Front.<sup>9</sup> The sheer magnitude of the Dominion contribution in 1914–18, however, changed the Commonwealth relationship, setting a precedent for the Second World War. The level of Dominion sacrifice necessitated greater recognition of their individual status, and the undercurrents of independent national identity suddenly emerged, sometimes in formal national actions. An increasing demand for the concentration of Dominion national forces in the field, the institution of national days to raise war funds on the home fronts, and national responses to Dominion glory in battle, all highlighted separate identities while simultaneously ensuring greater Dominion involvement in the war. In Canada, Australia and, to a much lesser extent, South Africa, where settler-colony territories were united to form single nations, these national actions were of great importance in transcending the pre-federal—and often quite disparate—colonial locales. Vimy Ridge for Canada,<sup>10</sup> the Anzac campaign in Gallipoli for Australians and New Zealanders and,<sup>11</sup> again to a much lesser extent, the South African defence of Delville Wood during the Somme,<sup>12</sup> gave the new nations individual battlefield legacies, which were memorialised and commemorated in the canons of national literature and retained in popular memory.

In 1919, the Dominions placed separate signatures on the Treaty of Versailles, acknowledging their increasing independence internationally.

In 1925, London further recognised the importance of the Dominions within the empire through the creation of the Dominions Office and a cabinet position for a Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, responsible for relations with the Dominions.<sup>13</sup> Around this time, the UK proceeded to appoint representatives of the British government to the Dominions, where previously only Governors-General represented the Crown. These new High Commissioners (Canada 1928, South Africa 1930, Australia 1936 and New Zealand 1939) reciprocated the long-established diplomatic representation the Dominions had enjoyed in the UK, again unique within the empire. A High Commissioner in London represented Canada from 1880, followed by New Zealand in 1905, Australia in 1910 and South Africa in 1911. South Africa, Canada and the new Dominion, the Irish Free State,<sup>14</sup> took leadership in the subsequent interwar drive for full independence. Balfour's Declaration of 1926, declaring the Commonwealth countries 'equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs' was confirmed by the legal reality, packaged as the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Canada and South Africa hastily adopted the Statute, whereas Australia and New Zealand declined to follow and maintained their constitutional links to the UK throughout the 1930s.

These contrasting stances on the Statute of Westminster are suggestive of some of the differences among the Dominions as the Second World War approached. The preceding paragraphs portray the Anglo-centric story—'British settlers', 'British culture' and, ultimately, 'British Dominions'. The reality was much more nuanced, and the demographics of the Dominions offer one reason for this. The most complicated situation existed in South Africa. British South Africans (from 1948 more commonly English or English-speaking South Africans, a modern day 'forgotten people'),<sup>15</sup> were a minority of the white Europeans in the Dominion; the majority were Afrikaners of Dutch descent, a group that fought the British Empire and opposed a British connection with armed force as recently as the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the largely disenfranchised non-white majority outnumbered the white population by four to one in 1939. In South Africa, the majority of the population was ambivalent about the British Empire at best, and portions of the Afrikaner population in particular could be, and frequently were, openly hostile towards the Commonwealth relationship.<sup>16</sup>

In Canada, the population was also divided. The French-speaking population, around a third of Canada's populace in 1939, first made their home

in North America within France's settler-colonies and remained present all across Canada, although centred in the stronghold of Quebec. Here too there was opposition to any sign of politically biased or overly familial relations with the UK, particularly if they came at Canada's perceived expense. This French-speaking society valued its own pre-revolutionary French heritage and largely rejected British North American culture, refusing to readily absorb imperial ideals or integrate within the empire as imperialists had hoped. The *Canadiens* as a society were of their North American homeland, not of a global British empire.<sup>17</sup>

In Australia and New Zealand, a more homogeneously British-originated population allowed for less complicated Anglo-Dominion relationships. Significant minorities did exist, most notably the Irish Catholics in Australia, and they could still influence events. The simple fact was that non-British minorities—and in South Africa's case, majorities—put constraints on the actions of Dominion governments, even when these governments were largely sympathetic to the UK's views. The substantial contribution of the Dominions to the Great War, as noted above, was later framed as heroic and unifying, but their extensive involvement in the war was not born from an untroubled consensus during the conflict itself. Anti-war riots broke out among French-speaking Canadians, Afrikaners launched a short-lived uprising, successful opposition was led by Irish Catholics and adopted by a minority of British Australians to narrowly prevent the Australian government from imposing conscription,<sup>18</sup> and a conscription crisis in Canada pitted English- and French-Canadians in direct opposition with one another, causing divisions that shaped much of Canada's interwar political landscape.<sup>19</sup> Equally, these countervailing views were often utilised by Dominion governments to restrain pro-British elements or resist requests from London, particularly in Canada and South Africa.

The traditional imperial links therefore existed and influenced events, but they were privileged mainly by those of British origin. Even then, national circumstances sometimes called imperial demands into question, particularly as Dominion national identities increasingly emerged. Nor did British heritage equate with sympathy for London's policies or subservience to Westminster. Indeed, Dominion populations often expressed the intention to be 'Better Britons' and build 'Better Britains', signalling a close affinity with the mother country, but also a persistent recognition of the shortcomings of the society and governance the settlers had left behind.<sup>20</sup> The Dominions by 1939 were independent



countries that remained within the empire by choice. Whilst privileging the British connection, Dominion governments increasingly pursued a national identity that would unite settlers of multiple origins rather than simply cater to the largely British majorities.

The Dominions therefore had their differences, particularly regarding their domestic populations, geography and, increasingly in the twentieth century, economies. Nevertheless striking similarities cut across and between the Dominions: Australia's and New Zealand's geographic location far from the centre of the empire; Canada's and Australia's political legacies of conscription crises; New Zealand's and South Africa's limited white populations; South Africa's, Australia's and New Zealand's membership in the UK-led financial bloc, the Sterling Area; and Canada's and South Africa's outspoken populations who opposed close Anglo-Dominion links, to name only a few. Their increasing and peaceful progression towards full independence, their relationships with the UK, and their Commonwealth membership open up fascinating comparative elements when exploring the Dominions, particularly during the Second World War when the traditional links with the UK were strained to an unprecedented degree.

The UK depended on Dominion support. The addition of the Dominion representatives to the Imperial War Cabinet during the Great War was a shrewd act to elicit the maximum effort from the Dominions, but it also signified the degree to which the UK relied on continuing Dominion combat manpower.<sup>21</sup> The UK had long recognised that it lacked the strength in numbers that potential enemies such as Germany and the Soviet Union could employ in continental armies. Dominion manpower—viewed as primarily British—was a natural extension to British power from London's perspective. As the Secretary to the British Committee of Imperial Defence warned his Prime Minister in 1936, 'we could not have won the last war without the fullest support of the dominions, and we cannot hope to win any future world war without that support.'<sup>22</sup> The Great War proved the practical importance of Dominion support, but interwar constitutional developments suggested that its employment could not be taken for granted. From the UK's perspective, Australia and New Zealand, and, to a lesser extent, Canada, were expected to fight alongside the UK in a future war, but South Africa was a less certain case. Even here, however, prominent supporters of the Commonwealth connection within the country—most notably Jan Smuts, prime minister from 1939, whom London held in highest esteem—gave the UK hope that all of the Dominions would

consent to be appendages to British military strength, despite their newly independent status. The Dominions did just that, all declaring war within a week of London's decision to do so in 1939.

This alone was a success for the UK. Nevertheless, whereas the UK started its rearmament programme in the mid-1930s, it was not until the later that decade that the Dominions followed this example.<sup>23</sup> With the tremendous casualties and divisions caused by the Great War still fresh in the memory of Dominion leaders, the Dominion governments abandoned interwar international collective security ideals and armed for another European war more slowly than the UK. Rearmament was therefore uniformly limited in the Dominions upon the outbreak of the Second World War. The lack of preparation for war was a counteracting force against the benefits in interoperability—the interchangeable and cooperative capacity of UK and Dominion forces—that existed because Dominion armed forces followed British training methods and used British equipment. The weight that the Dominions brought to the Commonwealth war effort was of an uncertain quantity on the outbreak of war, one that would be determined by the subsequent commitment of Dominion governments to mobilise and employ their armed forces. The following chapters trace the nature of these inauspicious beginnings and the truly vast contribution to British victory that they paradoxically foreshadowed.

## THE TIMELINE OF WAR

The strategic developments of the war were crucial in determining the extent and importance of Dominion involvement. Before the spring of 1940, the Allies broadly expected the Second World War to follow the precedent of the Great War—a prolonged ground defence of Western Europe against German forces, led by the French Army with an increasingly important British Empire contribution. At sea, the major threat was perceived to be raids by the German 'pocket battleships', although it was a rapid German victory over Allied air forces and heavy bombing raids that were viewed as the greatest threats of immediate defeat.<sup>24</sup> During this phase, although Dominion governments considered a British victory to be in their interests, they sought to balance the desire of the pro-UK and imperially minded elements of their societies for a striking military contribution against the fear of causing the same social schisms of the previous conflict, most notably conscription crises and anti-war demonstrations. Early contributions were tempered due to limited preparedness around

the Dominions and because of the perception that a protracted conflict would facilitate a significant mobilisation period in the Dominions.

The fall of France in the summer of 1940, a pivotal moment in the twentieth century, changed attitudes to the war across the alliance.<sup>25</sup> With the UK under direct threat of invasion, the Commonwealth faced an unexpected strategic predicament. For an entire year, the Dominions were the UK's ranking allies against the Axis, with Stalin still allied to Hitler.<sup>26</sup> The British Empire stood alone. Pro-British sentiments were heightened in the Dominions, and new measures were taken to support the mother country, although the Dominions were not individually threatened by the current belligerents in the war. This underscores the strength of the Anglo-Dominion connections.

The following chapters illustrate how the changing strategic picture presented new opportunities for Dominion intervention and dramatically altered the early war plans of the Dominions. Developments such as the loss of European sea ports and supplies, Italian entry into the war in June 1940, ground fighting in North Africa from September 1940, and the prolonged British inability to strike at Germany on the European mainland other than through air attack, all shaped the nature and amplified the importance of the Dominion contribution to the war. As the eyes of the world were on centre stage, the Battle of Britain, the Dominions became increasingly involved in ensuring that the empire survived and that the UK maintained the capacity and supplies to fight on if it too survived its invasion threat. In the air war over the UK, the Dominions provided pilots and aircrews, while on the ground Canadians garrisoned the country. The Dominions provided an important psychological boost to the people of the UK: Churchill emphasised their support, citing the 'moving terms in which they endorse our decision to fight on, and declare themselves ready to share our fortunes and to persevere to the end'.<sup>27</sup> The two years following France's defeat were the most important in terms of the Dominions' role in British victory.

Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor at the end of that year transformed the military balance.<sup>28</sup> The USA, already a benevolent neutral, became central to Allied victory. In particular, Lend-Lease provided the material backbone of victory, and the USA was capable of an increasingly intensive manpower contribution alongside overstretched imperial forces in the final 18 months of the war. If the USA was the arsenal of the Allies, then the Soviet Union was the army. The Eastern Front, the titanic land-struggle of the

war, claimed four out of every five German soldiers killed. Nevertheless, neither the USA nor the Soviet Union dictated the Dominions' date of entry into the conflict, and a lack of preparation meant that it was not until the second half of 1943 that the giant preponderance of power they brought to the Allied cause was truly felt. In turn, by the end of 1943, the importance of the Dominion contribution was reduced in relation to overall strategic planning for London—as the following chapters demonstrate, it was in increasingly specialised and specific areas that the Dominions were important to the UK's conduct of war from this time. However, the Dominions never lost their importance to the UK in narrowing the yawning gap between British Empire manpower resources and those of the USA and the Soviet Union. In the post-war era, the success of wartime Commonwealth cooperation led British policy-makers to believe the empire might provide the resources to allow the UK to stand as a third power between its continent-sized wartime allies.

### WRITING ABOUT BRITAIN, THE DOMINIONS AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Second World War is a topic that has generated a vast amount of historical literature, a pattern that shows no sign of stagnating.<sup>29</sup> From scholars specialising in specific theatres or military services, to historians tracing the belligerents' diplomatic manoeuvres or leadership by military commanders and, of course, ambitious histories spanning the course of the entire struggle, the conflict continues to prove a fertile area of research. Yet despite the essential role played by the Commonwealth, it has been surprisingly neglected in Second World War historiography. Many of the broader texts and general histories make very limited, if any, mention of the Dominions.<sup>30</sup> The contribution of the Dominions is generally subsumed into the larger story of the British effort, effectively meaning that of the British Empire in its entirety. While this does reflect a certain reality of the war, at least in terms of strategic direction, too often the UK's war effort is made synonymous to that of the Dominions and empire as a whole. Understanding the Commonwealth alliance provides insight into the importance of the settler-colony to mother country relationship, signifying that the UK was an exceptional imperial power. The success of the British system of imperialism, a system that facilitated the vast and voluntary cooperative contribution from the independent British Dominions, was far more effective than that of other European imperial

powers. This was because of the strength of the Anglo-Dominion relationships on multiple levels.

Although popular memory in the UK has yet to catch up to the historiography, the lack of attention to the Dominions' role in the war is a point that is slowly being addressed by modern historians.<sup>31</sup> An increasing recognition of the Dominions has been reflected in a renewed sense that the UK was the centre of a global 'British world' network that provided many of the resources necessary for victory. At the same time, the incorporation of a subtle, yet crucially important, lexical change in recent British historiography of the Second World War has occurred. No longer were the ambiguous 'British' forces responsible for imperial successes and failures, now the hitherto sparingly mentioned 'British and Commonwealth forces' are increasingly credited with many more of these feats.<sup>32</sup> This recognition highlights an important dimension of this book: that the Commonwealth alliance was exceptional in its closeness and cooperation, making it stand apart from other alliances or associations that functioned during the war.

Indeed the whole issue of the UK being 'alone' has needed, and is now increasingly receiving, suitable attention and revision.<sup>33</sup> This standing alone period, between the Fall of France and the entry into war of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, has become part of the British war story. Although the Commonwealth effort was at a formative stage and still in rapid development, Canadians still formed the best-trained and available division to repel a German invasion of the British Isles; Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were all present and fighting in North Africa; and initiatives such as the British Commonwealth Air Training Scheme were up and running. Britain was at the centre of a global alliance. Churchill might have repeatedly acknowledged the unity of the Commonwealth and British Empire during wartime speeches, but it was his own history that set up much of the mythology of the war in the UK—and it vastly enhanced the immediate post-war trend of largely writing out or downplaying the Dominion effort in the war story of the UK.<sup>34</sup> In light of recent historiography, what remains to be acknowledged is the pervasiveness of the Commonwealth in facilitating British strategy across the war effort.

The Dominions have received much more substantial attention in the field of imperial historiography, particularly in the last decade. It has most often been left to imperial or national historians to tell a now familiar story of how great contributions to the war helped transform the Dominions from dependence on the UK to confident and largely independent middle

powers.<sup>35</sup> The converse relationship—that of the UK’s dependence on the Dominions to project military power globally during the war—is often overlooked.<sup>36</sup> Recently, Darwin’s *Empire Project* has offered a fresh emphasis on the place of the Dominions in the maintenance of the British world system, although the focus of the text is on the final stages and decline of the empire.<sup>37</sup>

This placement of the Dominions at the centre of the British world has been limited in degree. Prior to the rapid decolonisation of British colonies in Africa and Asia, the Dominions were often central to the historical approach towards the British Empire. This approach emphasised a laudatory narrative of the transformation of formal empire into a cooperative Commonwealth, which the Anglo-Dominion relationships pioneered.<sup>38</sup> Following Robinson and Gallagher’s seminal article on ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’,<sup>39</sup> and in the midst and wake of rapid decolonisation from the late 1950s, the historical emphasis changed to focus on ‘subaltern’ relationships between the colonies and metropole. As some historians questioned the future direction of imperial history generally,<sup>40</sup> the concept of a free alliance of states united by largely shared genetic, religious and symbolic ideas found little scope in this period of historical writing, and was later subsumed into global history.<sup>41</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, and increasingly in the last decade, the ‘white’ Commonwealth has re-emerged in the literature as an important strand of imperial history. This is an unsurprising development, because the Dominion relationships are highly susceptible to comparative study and analysis in the form of cultural history as well as via the more traditional categories of military, diplomatic and economic history.<sup>42</sup> Imperial historians such as Cain and Hopkins have re-engaged with the story of the Dominions,<sup>43</sup> while others such as Belich, Darwin, and Buckner and Francis have placed them at the foreground of their work.<sup>44</sup>

This transformation has been aided by the cultural analysis of ‘Britishness’ as a global identity. Since Colley reintroduced the concept of a Britishness that transcended narrower nationalisms and unified the UK against perceived ‘others’, the question of a shared British culture and identity in Dominion populations has been gradually re-opened.<sup>45</sup> Whether it is the unity of the ‘English-speaking peoples’, ‘Britannic sentiment’ or a ‘British diaspora’, the significance of a global British identity and unifying traditions have been the topic of considerable debate in recent years, and one which is of great importance to the Commonwealth relationship.<sup>46</sup> This cultural emphasis in combination with an increasing interest

in transnational global networks has provided new theoretical frameworks in which the Dominions can be analysed,<sup>47</sup> moving beyond the colony-to-nation narrative. Colley and others have perceived the increase in a unifying 'British' sentiment in times of war, an aspect that this book will consider for the Dominions during the Second World War.

If rarely considered collectively, the individual Dominions at war have been explored thoroughly, with the exception of South Africa. The official history series produced in each Dominion are comprehensive and continue to provide a useful starting point for research on any Dominion's war experience.<sup>48</sup> These histories set the agenda for the study of the Dominions in the Second World War in the immediate post-war era. As useful as they are in detailing the intricacies of the Dominions at war, these texts lack the comparative Commonwealth perspective necessary to fully understand the efforts of each Dominion within the wider alliance, an area that has been subject to considerable neglect. More recently, histories of the military services in the Dominions, many of which are reaching their centenary anniversaries, have provided another invaluable source in understanding how the Second World War was negotiated by the individual Dominions and in drawing the links between independent military services and full national independence.<sup>49</sup> This analysis seeks to place the development of the Dominion military forces in the context of the changing Commonwealth relationship, contrasting the benefits gained by the UK from a greater Dominion military effort with the consequential effects that the expansion of Dominion military forces had on the existing Anglo-Dominion bonds.<sup>50</sup>

Only in South Africa are the official and service histories really lacking. The South African official histories of the war, which were not completed because the war histories department was shut down by the nationalist Afrikaner government that came to power in the late 1940s, fail to provide a comprehensive account of the country at war.<sup>51</sup> Several later attempts to produce an unofficial history series of South Africa in the Second World War, a dedicated military journal and, in particular, an increasing interest in military history in the last decade, have started to fill this gap in South Africa's historiography.<sup>52</sup> By drawing from the South African national and military archives, as well as drafts of unpublished official histories of South Africa at war, I offer insights into previously unexplored or neglected areas of the South African contribution to British victory. South Africa's unique position of having only a minority of its population consider itself British makes the Union a crucial analytical tool in relation to the other

Dominions and the wider alliance, particularly valuable in considering the limits of a British world system that relied so heavily on ostensibly independent countries.

As these more recent South African histories demonstrate, the war record of the individual Dominions has also received considerable attention beyond the official histories each country has produced, some of which are essential reading.<sup>53</sup> Yet while texts such as J. Beaumont's (ed.), *Australia's War 1939–45* and J. L. Granatstein's, *Canada's War* provide broad appraisals of the involvement of individual Dominions,<sup>54</sup> they too largely ignore the topic of combined Commonwealth action, focusing on national issues and often eschewing the broader Commonwealth context in favour of comprehensive accounts of a single Dominion at war. Initiatives such as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan show that individual national analyses are not sufficient to show the true extent and nature of the Commonwealth effort in the Second World War, which this study seeks to do. Instead, they form crucial strands in understanding a larger story. Both the UK and the Dominions consistently looked to the actions of the other Commonwealth members when discussing even bilateral Anglo-Dominion agreements, regularly invoking the example of other Dominions as a negotiating tool. The striking lack of inter-Dominion communication during the war did not correlate with a lack of mindfulness: in fact, although mainly facilitated in London via the Dominions Secretary and High Commissioners, inter-Dominion awareness was high. Discussions and agreements concluded in Anglo-Dominion negotiations could not be removed from the Commonwealth context.

In the field of diplomacy, this omission is less common. Historians including Ritchie Ovendale, Nicholas Mansergh and, more recently, Andrew Stewart, have written comprehensively on the Anglo-Dominion diplomatic relationships from the immediate pre-war through to the post-war era.<sup>55</sup> The Dominions' significance in wartime imperial diplomacy is therefore largely established. Nevertheless, there is a risk that too much emphasis on diplomatic relations leads to a teleological approach and analysis when it comes to understanding the decolonisation of the Dominions. To understand both this trajectory and the Dominion contribution to British victory, we must incorporate the new trends in imperial historiography that give us a greater awareness of sentimental ties and cultural bonds. Dominion leaders persistently pressed individual nationalisms and cited the countervailing forces working against more intimate Commonwealth relations during Anglo-Dominion discussions; yet



the extent of the Dominion contribution to the war and the citizens volunteering to become servicemen all across the Dominions in such significant numbers, which would scarcely have been possible without significant enthusiasm for the Anglo-Dominion connections around the Commonwealth, suggest that the structural faults in the empire exposed by years of cooperatively fighting a total war were not irreparable.<sup>56</sup>

The subject of the Dominions collectively at war has also not gone entirely unconsidered. The interwar Commonwealth alliance has been analysed convincingly,<sup>57</sup> individual theatres are now increasingly looked at from a Commonwealth-wide perspective rather than through the lens of a single country,<sup>58</sup> and studies of multiple Dominions, mainly comparative, are increasingly emerging on many aspects of war.<sup>59</sup> Several accounts have been offered of the entire imperial war effort, most notably in recent years by Jackson.<sup>60</sup> The Dominions' efforts are considered in some depth in this latter text, but again the consideration is less of the Commonwealth collectively and more of individual countries, albeit within the wider structure of the imperial war effort. As Grey has argued, such comparison is a fundamental part of imperial history, preventing it from degenerating into a loose assembly of national histories,<sup>61</sup> and therefore the individual analyses in this framework are of great importance to understanding how the various efforts compared.

Nevertheless the Dominions must be understood as a collective: they were the UK's former settler-colonies, with a fundamentally important place within the wider British world system. In imperial terms, the Commonwealth was a unique structure: a functioning subgroup within and yet strangely remote from the empire, which deserves attention as such. Indeed, previous debates that were relevant to the British Empire as a whole—for instance whether it was a source of strategic strength or weakness to the UK during the Second World War<sup>62</sup>—simply cannot be applied to the Commonwealth group, which stands apart through the nature of its relationship with the UK and, as I will demonstrate, its sheer importance to British victory. As Darwin has argued and the Second World War was to prove, the Dominions were foundational in the maintenance of the British world system:<sup>63</sup> a world system that could not be sustained without winning the two world wars; two world wars that the UK could not have won without the Dominions.

This contribution to the historiography is therefore relevant to a wide range of areas spanning cultural, military, economic, imperial and international history. The story of the Dominions is crucial to understanding the

importance of empire to imperial powers at war; to understanding processes of decolonisation and the impact of war on national self-awareness and the formation of national identities; and, ultimately, to truly understanding British victory. I seek to analyse the Dominions primarily in terms of the war effort they produced—emphasising its essential nature to the UK and therefore adding an important element to the understanding of British triumph in the Second World War. In piecing this contribution together, and the resultant diplomatic issues it raised, it is also a revealing study of alliance warfare and the foundations of British world power. Finally, by considering the contribution in terms of a wider alliance, the issues of empire necessarily arise: what were the Dominions willing to contribute and why? Why did the Dominion effort take the forms that it did? How did this affect the imperial relationships?

This book looks at the Dominion role in British victory through four sections, each its own case study. These were chosen to highlight the depth of the Dominion contribution and explore its nature, incorporating both cooperative Commonwealth initiatives and individual Dominion efforts. The Dominion contribution to the Second World War was significant in numbers alone—almost 2.5 million military personnel enlisted in Dominion military services, the vast majority of whom were volunteers. Dominion troops were present at Singapore and Alamein; they fought in Italy, Greece and France. Australians manned ships in the Mediterranean, New Zealanders flew bombers over Germany and South Africans led the conquest of Italian-held East Africa. Canadians garrisoned the UK in preparation for an attempted German invasion that never materialised, and they garrisoned Hong Kong against a Japanese invasion that did. Put simply, the effort was too extensive to cover in a book of this size. Instead, the four case studies will illustrate the argument. The studies look at how the war was financed; the training of military personnel (air cadets); supply and logistics in the war at sea; and the battlefield performance of ground forces in North Africa.

These areas were chosen for several reasons. First, they capture something of the nature of the Second World War: it was global, it was unprecedented in size, and it was total warfare. This involved more than mobilising armed forces: it meant mobilising economies and societies to meet the demands of the war. By looking at the war effort from its financial underpinnings through to the battlefield in a series of case studies, the ubiquitous importance of the Dominions can be seen in snapshots, without becoming overburdened in tracing the minutiae

of Commonwealth involvement. Above all, the case studies have been selected to demonstrate the argument that the UK could not have won the war without the Dominions.

Part I explores war finance. For the UK, how the war would be financed was acknowledged as a problem from the outset. It was apparent that there would be a significant dollar-gap in payments for imports from North America and that substantial aid was required from the empire to ensure that the UK could receive all the materials necessary to fight the war. This section highlights the differing nature of the Dominion economies by 1939, despite the similarities in origin that arose from their shared history as settler-colonies. In particular, Canada (with dollars) and South Africa (with gold) were uniquely well positioned to aid the UK throughout the war, whereas Australia and New Zealand were unable to offer significant financial support until the second half of the conflict. The section considers the different national pressures on Dominion governments in providing external aid, because war economies intersected with both the domestic and overseas aspects of the war effort. Given its individual capacity to assist the UK, Canada is considered first, followed by South Africa, which provides an illuminating Dominion counter-narrative to the programmes of Canadian aid. Finally Australia and New Zealand are taken together, reflecting the broad similarities in their financial situation and their analogous methods of assistance for the UK.

The next section looks at the training of cadets for the air war. Here the UK cooperated with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, to form a British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), which was responsible for training air crews from each of the participating countries. The effort was centred in Canada, to which each country sent a portion of its aircrews for elementary training, but schools existed in each member country of the BCATP. The mixing and interaction of aircrews, both during training and once in the field, made this one of the most concerted and cooperative military training schemes of any alliance in the history of warfare. Given their joint participation, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are analysed together in this section to consider how issues of equipment, national identity and ultimately military independence varied for the Dominions within the same scheme. South Africa stood apart and is considered in a separate section. Not politically secure enough to join the BCATP at its conception and with its own aims for air strength in mind, the country belatedly entered into a bilateral training agreement with the RAF under the pressure of developing events on the African continent.

The focus then moves to supply and the war at sea, examining the protection and maintenance of British merchant shipping. This section brings Canada to the forefront, because its development of a large and efficient navy specialised in the field of escorts remains the most acclaimed contribution by a Dominion to the war at sea. Somewhat surprisingly, South Africa had a hitherto unacknowledged but very crucial role to play in regard to supply. When strategic developments led to the diversion of a vast amount of shipping around the ‘Cape Route’ of southern Africa, the Union became a Commonwealth shipping hub, responsible for the maintenance and provisions for a vast amount of shipping. Whereas the very separate contributions of Canada and South Africa are considered individually, the course of the war did not elevate the maritime effort of Australia and New Zealand to the same level of importance for the UK. Instead, the two Pacific Dominions, considered collectively in this section, were responsible for developing independent naval power and ensuring the efficiency of their ports, as merchant shipping was persistently the most serious limiting factor in Allied strategic planning.

In Part IV I consider the battlefield itself, specifically the war in the desert, up until the climactic and pivotal victory for British forces at El Alamein in November 1942. The Dominions of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa all fought within the British forces in Middle East Command and under the overall military command of British generals. In this role, the significance of their manpower contribution—both in number and in form—is the primary consideration of the case study. Nevertheless, as the analysis of the three Dominions in North Africa will show, they were each forced to individually consider the issues of the national concentration of their units, the employment of their forces and the welfare of their troops, due to the size and significance of their effort. Canada is set apart in its own chapter: the question posed is why, with an effort so prevalent throughout the previous case studies, was it not represented by even a single brigade of soldiers in the most sustained imperial land campaign of the first half of the war?

The case studies therefore deal with a range of contributions that span domestic economies to the battlefield and dockyards in the South Pacific to aerodromes on the prairies of Canada. Selecting these studies, however, involved emphasising certain areas and omitting several others. As such, certain parts of the war are largely neglected in this analysis. The Dominion home fronts are brought in only where they affected the actions of the Dominions in relation to their support for the UK: for instance,

concern about national unity or domestic political pressure, factors that could prove crucial in determining the conduct of war.

The Pacific Theatre is largely omitted—for obvious geographical reasons it was crucial to Australia and New Zealand, but the theatre was mainly under overall American strategic control for the majority of the war.<sup>64</sup> Its importance to this argument was in the threat of Japan, which heightened Australian and New Zealand commitment to collective security and imperial defence in the interwar period and furthered their commitment to a policy of victory at all costs following Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Nevertheless, the success of Japanese expansion, particularly the fall of Singapore in February 1942, raised questions about the future security of Australia and New Zealand if they relied on the Commonwealth alone for their protection,<sup>65</sup> and tempered the role of the Pacific Dominions in the European Theatre due to the threat closer to home. The Pacific Theatre was certainly secondary to the European War in British strategy—in this book I thus privilege the fight against Germany, and to a lesser extent, Italy, just as planners in London did.

The final section posed the question of which battlefields to emphasise. North Africa was selected as the ground theatre because of the involvement of three Dominions alongside the UK, but the invasions of Sicily and Italy also provided this possibility. Unlike these latter operations, however, the campaign led by Middle East Command was a British one, with imperial troops conducting the overwhelming majority of the fighting and British commanders determining strategy. To the end of 1942, before the fighting alliance was truly Anglo-American, the importance of the Dominions to British victory was heightened by a lack of large non-imperial allies that could contribute to British battlefields. This suggests the final area of emphasis, a chronological bias in this book for the period prior to the summer of 1943. This is because the Dominion effort was most important to the UK before the USA and the Soviet Union had achieved a high level of mobilisation. Nevertheless, certain aspects in the finance, air war and maritime sections follow developments to the end of the war, where these remain relevant to the argument.

A more significant boundary is the choice of Dominions themselves. Alongside the four belligerent Dominions, the analysis could be widened by incorporating the non-belligerent Dominion, the Irish Free State;<sup>66</sup> the lapsed Dominion, Newfoundland;<sup>67</sup> the small settler-colony and proto-Dominion, Southern Rhodesia;<sup>68</sup> and, most strikingly, the jewel in the imperial crown and quasi-Commonwealth member, India.<sup>69</sup>

The Irish Free State is not included because, as a non-belligerent, it did not significantly contribute to British victory nor face the same issues that other Dominions encountered in fighting the war, making it an unhelpful comparative case in regard to the rest of the Commonwealth within this argument. Newfoundland, the UK's oldest colony, was reliant on a Crown Commission for governance at the outbreak of war due to an economic collapse in the 1930s, confusing the place it could find among the other self-governing countries within the empire in this study. Although it fought and contributed to the war, before being absorbed into Canada in the post-war era, it was restricted by its small population to playing only a minor role in victory in comparison to the other Dominions.

Southern Rhodesia is referenced in one case study, its importance to air training proving significant in bringing about the Anglo-South African training scheme, as well as in the aircrews it trained in its own bilateral training arrangement with the UK. Southern Rhodesia was an aspiring Dominion; however, its effort was also constrained by a small white population of just 50,000, in addition to prohibitive racial policies. The capacity to make a substantial war effort; full self-governance and Dominion status; Commonwealth membership, with all that this entailed in terms of diplomacy and coordinated defence measures; and substantial populations of British descent: these were the markers that set apart the four belligerent Dominions I study in this book from the rest of the empire, including the Irish Free State, Newfoundland and Southern Rhodesia.

India is therefore a more noteworthy exclusion: although officially a colony, the country enjoyed substantial self-governance; it fulfilled its potential as an important contributor to the war effort and it was sometimes represented in Commonwealth meetings, albeit not on equal terms with the Dominions. It had its role to play in British victory, but nevertheless stands apart from this book. As Belich has noted, in the Great War, the similar number of troops mobilised by India is sometimes used to equate the Indian effort with that of the Dominions collectively. However, in terms of the importance of 'Britonism', as he terms it, the more accurate test would be the contribution as a proportion of population, in which the Dominions' effort far exceeded India's.<sup>70</sup> This interpretation of Britonism, or the importance of populations that considered themselves British and embraced British culture, is an important strand of my analysis.

Furthermore, on the outbreak of the Second World War, the legacy of what the UK viewed as the Indian Army's mutinous past continued to influence how London employed Indian manpower. Nineteenth-

century mutinies led to the requirement that each brigade of the British Indian Army incorporate a core British battalion. Accusations of widespread self-inflicted wounds during the Great War further undermined British confidence. Most strikingly, the creation of the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army in August 1942, which fought against British imperial forces, highlighted the diametrical differences between India and the Dominions. Put simply, the Dominions were fighting *for* the UK; India was fighting *because of* the UK. This was the difference between an imperial and a colonial relationship, between having a stake in British victory and questioning the worth of such a victory. Although India raised a similar number of servicemen for war, the country's wartime contributions were subject to significant constraints, both because of limitations on the roles that London designated to Indians and because of the Indian Army's financial cost to the British government. The Dominions, in contrast, largely financed their own contributions, and their British subjects participated in the increasingly vital technical functions of war, particularly in air forces.

Writing a book on five countries on four different continents necessitated the employment of sources from each location, to perceive the forces on the periphery that shaped the Dominions' assistance for the UK. Although the UK set imperial war strategy, the independence of the Dominions allowed each country to determine the extent and manner of its involvement in the war. Documents produced in London therefore could only tell part of the story and the global nature of the alliance required a transnational approach to the research, to integrate the factors affecting the Dominions as well as the UK. The national archives of the UK and the former Dominions, with the exception of South Africa, proved extremely important in constructing this text. Bringing together military, political and economic factors, the following chapters draw on the papers of prime ministers and departments of external affairs, the Dominions Office in London, treasuries, the papers of the various armed services and their political representatives, as well as those of multiple wartime bodies such as economic or maritime advisory committees.

Outside of national archives, other collections add to the depth of the discussion, such as those at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The most important of these was the South African Defence Force Documentation Centre in Pretoria, which houses papers relating to the South African armed forces, the two world wars and drafts of unpublished official histories of the war. This collection was essential in making up for the patchy availability of papers relating to the Union government at

war available at the National Archives of South Africa. In all, the research involved more than 40,000 miles of travel between London and the capital cities of the former Dominions.

Based on these sources, I will demonstrate the significance of the Dominion role in the British war effort. The following case studies explore the extent of the Dominion contribution and the domestic and international factors that shaped the nature of Dominion involvement in the conflict. I consider the Dominions as a group and comparatively, because it is only in this context that their contributions can be fully understood. The following case studies are revealing of the character and importance of imperial power based upon settler-colonies in the twentieth century, alliance warfare, and, ultimately, the role of the Dominions in British victory in the Second World War.

## NOTES

1. Churchill wrote of ‘the self-governing Dominions, these great communities far beyond the oceans who have been built up on our laws and on our civilization, and who are absolutely free to choose their course, but are absolutely devoted to the ancient Motherland, and who feel the same emotions which lead me to stake our all upon duty and honour.’ This section is excluded from the record of the debates, but is present in the draft of the speech. W. Churchill, *Never Give In!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches* (London, 2003), p. 187. See also 18 June 1940, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* (House of Commons), vol. 362, c. 58.
2. The Greater Britain concept became a topic of discussion in the Victorian era, partly sparked by the release of C. Dilkes, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-speaking countries during 1866 and 1867* (London, 1869). See also J. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009).
3. D. Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, 2004), p. 246. See also W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1948–1953).
4. D. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937–41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (London, 1981), p. 11.
5. The confederation of 1867 included Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Territories continued to be absorbed until 1949,



- when the Dominion of Newfoundland (now Newfoundland and Labrador) was unified with Canada.
6. T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979); A. Porter, 'The South African War and the Historians', *African Affairs*, 99, 397 (2000), 633–648.
  7. Although this was 'white' democracy and racial discrimination dictated the electorate. See R. Ross, A. Mager & B. Nasson (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa: Volume 2, 1885–1994* (Cambridge, 2011).
  8. R. Holland, 'The British Empire and the Great War, 1914–1918', in W. Roger Louis and J.M. Brown (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999); G. Martin, 'Financial and Manpower Aspects of the Dominions' and India's Contribution to Britain's War Effort, 1914–1919', (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1987).
  9. Winter takes a closer look at the impact of outward migration from the UK pre-First World War and its effects on the war and subsequent commemoration, in J. Winter, 'Migration, War and Empire: The British Case', *Annales de Demographic Historique*, 1 (2002), 143–60.
  10. J.F. Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997). T. Cook, *Canadians Fighting the Great War*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 2007–8).
  11. J. Lack (ed.), *Anzac Remembered: Selected Writings by K.S. Inglis* (Melbourne, 1998); M. Lake & H. Reynolds et al. (eds), *What's Wrong with ANZAC? The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney, 2010); J. Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's War 1914–1918* (St Leonard, 1995); C. Bean (ed.) 12 volumes of the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*. For New Zealand, P. Baker, *King and Country Call: New Zealanders, Conscription, and the Great War* (Auckland, 1988); C. Pugsley, *Gallipoli: The New Zealand Story* (Auckland, 1998); M. Wright, *Western Front: The New Zealand Division in the First World War, 1916–18* (Auckland, 2005).
  12. N. Cave, *Somme: Delville Wood* (London, 1999); G. Genis, 'Delville Wood: Eighty Years July 1916–July 1996' *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 26, 1 (1996), 4–21.
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  14. The Irish Free State is omitted from this analysis because it was a non-belligerent.

15. J. Lambert, “‘An Unknown People’: Reconstructing British South African Identity”, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37, 4 (2009), 599–617.
16. R. Hyam and P. Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003).
17. C. Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914* (Toronto, 1970).
18. C. Bridge, ‘Other People’s Wars?: Australia’s Military Involvement in the Twentieth Century’, *Australian Cultural History*, 28, (2010), 251–259.
19. J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto, 1977); T. Cook, *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver, 2006).
20. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, pp. 466–472.
21. In personnel the Dominions added around 20 per cent to the British Army in the Great War and even more to direct fighting strength, because Dominion men were primarily used as combat troops. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, p. 468.
22. ‘Report of the Defence Requirements Committee’, undated, Imperial Defence: Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) Committee on, The National Archives (TNA), Cabinet Office papers (CAB), CAB 21/434.
23. J. Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: How the Arms Race Drove the World to War, 1931–1941* (New York, 2010); G. C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939* (Edinburgh, 1979).
24. P. Stansky, *First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940* (New Haven, 2007); R. Titmuss, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950), pp. 3–4.
25. M. Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (London, 1949); D. Reynolds, ‘1940: Fulcrum of the Twentieth Century?’, *International Affairs*, 66, 2 (1990), 325–350.
26. ‘Great Britain Decides to Fight On’, in I. Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940–1941* (London, 2007); D. Reynolds, ‘Churchill and the British “Decision” to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons’, in R. Langhorne (ed.), *Diplomacy & Intelligence during the Second World War: Essays in Honour of F.H. Hinsley* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 147–167.
27. 18 June 1940, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* (House of Commons), vol. 362, c. 58.

28. Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*; P. O'Brien, 'East vs. West in the Defeat of Nazi Germany', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23, 2 (2000), 89–113. For the USA's economic preponderance, see A. Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006). For the Eastern Front, C. Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War: A Modern History* (London, 2007); N. Davies, *Europe at War 1939–1945: No Simple Victory* (London, 2006); and for the power balance in the east, T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2010).
29. Recent examples include: A. Beevor, *The Second World War* (London, 2012); M. Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War, 1939–45* (London, 2011); E. Mawdsley, *World War II: A New History* (Cambridge, 2009); A. Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London, 2010).
30. G. Weinberg, 'World War II: Comments on the Roundtable', *Diplomatic History*, 25, 3 (2001), 491–9, p. 491. See also, A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006), pp. 1–4.
31. The UK's official histories in part contributed to this lack of acknowledgement of the Dominions.
32. M. Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of World War Two* (Harlow, 2004); and M. Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London, 2010).
33. A. Jackson, 'The Empire/Commonwealth and the Second World War', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 100, 412 (2011), 65–78; D. Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London, 2011), which raises the issue of Britain fighting 'alone', at least in the view of much of Second World War historiography.
34. Reynolds, *Command of History*, p. 246.
35. Roger Louis & Brown, *British Empire, IV*.
36. A rare exception is G.L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 12, in which British reliance on Dominion support is acknowledged, if not expanded upon.
37. J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009).
38. For instance in J.H. Rose et al. (eds), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, (Cambridge, 1929–1963), which furthered the historical trail set by Seeley, *Expansion of England*. This approach

- reflected the hopes of imperialists at the time, something that was described later as a ‘Dream of Commonwealth’. M. Beloff, *Imperial Sunset: Vol. 2, Dream of Commonwealth 1921–42* (Basingstoke, 1989).
39. J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, ‘The Imperialism of Free Trade’, *The Economic History Review*, 6, 1 (1953), 1–15.
  40. D.K. Fieldhouse, ‘Can Humpty-Dumpty be put back together again? Imperial History in the 1980s’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (1984), 9–23.
  41. P. Buckner, ‘Presidential Address: Whatever happened to the British Empire?’, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 4, 1 (1993), 3–32.
  42. See, for instance, D. Schreuder & S. Ward (eds), *Australia’s Empire* (Oxford, 2008).
  43. P.J. Cain & A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914–1990* (London, 1993).
  44. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*; P. Buckner & R. Douglas Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005); Darwin, *Empire Project*.
  45. L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven, 1992); L. Colley, ‘Britishness and Otherness: An Argument’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31, 4 (1992), 309–329. See also W. Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2005).
  46. This largely falls under the umbrella of the ‘British world’. C. Bridge & P. Buckner, ‘Reinventing the British World’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 368, (2003), 77–88; C. Bridge & K. Fedorowich (eds), *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London, 2003), pp. 1–11.
  47. For instance, G.B. Magee and A.S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2010).
  48. *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, 22 vols. (Canberra, 1952–1977); *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45*, 48 vols. (Wellington, 1945–1963); Canada’s official histories were broken down by service, although C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto, 1970) is essential reading and references the other available official histories.
  49. For instance, A. Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume II: The Royal Australian Air Force* (Melbourne,

- 2001); M. Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century* (Toronto, 2009); and articles such as I. van der Waag & D. Visser, 'Between History, Amnesia and Selective Memory: The South African Armed Forces, a Century's Perspective', *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 40, 3 (2012), 1–12.
50. These themes are sometimes explored in the bilateral Anglo-Dominion context, such as in J. Vance, *Maple Leaf Empire: Canada, Britain, and Two World Wars* (Oxford, 2012). Vance brings together the concept of Canadian 'Britishness' with Anglo-Canadian military cooperation.
  51. J. Grey, "Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clio": The Rise and Fall of Union War Histories', *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 30, 2 (2000), 253–266; I. van der Waag, 'Contested Histories: Official History and the South African Military in the 20th Century', in J. Grey (ed.), *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth* (London, 2003).
  52. An unofficial 'official' history series was later written, which provides much of the previously unwritten story of South Africa's contribution. See N. Orpen, *South African Forces in World War Two (Vol. I): East African and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town, 1968), pp. iii–iv. Some later books, such as I. Gleeson, *The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers through Two World Wars* (Cape Town, 1994), have also made valuable contributions to the literature on the Union's war effort. This trend towards opening up the South African experience continues to emerge through books like N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (London, 2005); and articles such as A. Wessels 'The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF) September 1939 to September 1941', *Military History Journal*, 11, 5 (2000), 165–172.
  53. For instance, in Australia: D. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945* (Sydney, 1982); D. Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort, 1939–45* (St. Leonards, 1996); G. Long, *The Six Years War: A Concise History of Australia in the 1939–45 War* (Canberra, 1973).
  54. J. Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's War 1939–45* (St. Leonard's, 1996); J.L. Granatstein's, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939–1945* (Toronto, 1975). See also G. Hensley,

- Beyond the Battlefield: New Zealand and its Allies, 1939–45* (North Shore, 2009); and I.C. McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Second World War: The People, the Battles and the Legacy* (Auckland, 2004).
55. N. Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Co-operation and Post-war Change, 1939–1952* (London, 1958); R. Ovendale, ‘*Appeasement*’ and the English Speaking World: *Britain, the United States, the Dominions, and the Policy of ‘Appeasement’ 1937–1939* (Cardiff, 1975); R. Ovendale, *The English-speaking Alliance: Britain, the United States, the Dominions and the Cold War 1945–1951* (London, 1985); A. Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London, 2008).
  56. N. Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australia: Some Reflections’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies*, 31 (2003), 121–135. S. Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Carlton South, 2001).
  57. R. Holland, *Britain and the Commonwealth Alliance, 1918–1939* (London, 1981).
  58. J. Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, 2011).
  59. C. Bridge, ‘Australia’s and Canada’s Wars, 1914–18 and 1939–45: Some Reflections’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 361, (2001), 623–632; R.G. Haycock, ‘The “Myth” of Imperial Defence: Australian-Canadian bilateral Military Cooperation, 1942’, *War & Society*, 21 (1984), 65–84; M. MacMillan & F. Mackenzie (eds), *Parties Long Estranged: Canada and Australia in the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver, 2003); R. A. Preston & I. Wards, ‘Military and Defence Development in Canada, Australia and New Zealand: A Three-way Comparison’, *War & Society*, 5, 1 (1987), 1–21.
  60. Jackson, *British Empire*. Other examples include G. J. Barclay, *The Empire is Marching: A Study of the Military Effort of the British Empire, 1800–1945* (London, 1976); K. Jeffrey ‘The Second World War’, in Brown & Roger Louis, *Oxford History, Vol. IV*; and, A. Stewart, *A Very British Experience: Coalition, Defence & Strategy in the Second World War* (Brighton, 2012). D. Dilks offers a broad summary of the Dominions’ efforts in his pamphlet *Britain, the Commonwealth and the Wider World, 1939–45* (Bedford, 1998).
  61. J. Grey, *A Commonwealth of Histories: The Official Histories of the Second World War in the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth* (London, 1998), p. 2.

62. C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972), p. 566; M. Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London, 1972), p. 100; G.C. Peden, 'The Burden of Imperial Defence and the Continental Commitment Reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, 27, 2 (1987), 405–423.
63. Darwin, *Empire Project*, p. 11.
64. C. Bayly & T. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London, 2004); N.E. Sarantakes, *Allies Against the Rising Sun: The United States, the British Nations, and the Defeat of Imperial Japan* (Lawrence, 2009).
65. L. Allen, *Singapore 1941–42* (London, 1977); D. Day, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia & the Onset of the Pacific War, 1939–42* (London, 1988); A. Warren, *Singapore, 1942: Britain's Greatest Defeat* (London, 2002).
66. The historiography of Ireland has witnessed an increasing engagement and overlap with imperial history in recent years. Examples include, T. Foley & M. O'Connor (eds), *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture, and Empire* (Dublin, 2006); K. Jeffrey, *An Irish Empire?: Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996); K. O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Ireland Radical Connections, 1919–1964* (Manchester, 2008); S. Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford, 2000).
67. G.W.L. Nicholson, *More Fighting Newfoundlanders: A History of Newfoundland's Fighting Forces in the Second World War* (Ottawa, 1969).
68. J.F. MacDonald, *The War History of Southern Rhodesia, 2 Vols.* (Salisbury, 1947–1950).
69. Bayley & Harper, *Forgotten Armies*; K. Roy (ed.), *War and Society in Colonial India, 1807–1945* (New Delhi, 2010).
70. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, p. 469.

# ‘Give Us the Stuff Just the Same’: The Dominions and British War Finance

## INTRODUCTION

The Dominions were essential in sustaining the UK financially during the war.<sup>1</sup> This financial provision reversed the traditional matriarchal role the UK had held with its former settler-colonies and was worth in excess of £2bn.<sup>2</sup> Through various methods of assistance, and to very different extents, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa relieved the financial burden that total war exerted on London’s resources. The UK finished the war victorious, but was transformed from major creditor to the world’s largest debtor; the Dominions all emerged from the war in improved financial condition and with economies that had advanced industrially. The Dominions thus managed to provide major assistance to the UK without ending the war in the same financial plight.<sup>3</sup>

This was because of the motivating factors behind Dominion financial policy. As the extent of the assistance suggests, one important consideration was the UK’s needs and the Dominions’ desire to do their utmost to win the war alongside the UK. Other concerns, however, clearly ranked above this. Finance was a point where the external war effort overlapped with the home front—sometimes the two areas collided, because greater sacrifices at home facilitated greater overseas expenditure. Thus the sacrifices civilians were willing to make were of crucial importance to governments trying to manage global warfare. More important still, the political implications of any economic measures and the standard of living on the home front were always at the forefront in decision-making on external aid. Second only to possible and immediate political vicissitudes were



the implications of any action on the post-war economic position of a Dominion. Fortunately for London, Dominion governments largely considered the UK to be of continued importance for the post-war era, mainly for trade. Nevertheless, what the Dominions could afford to pay externally was not the dominant factor in what was provided.

The UK was expectant of major cooperation in financing the war. Churchill anticipated the vast American assistance provided to the UK through Lend-Lease in correspondence with his American counterpart, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, contending that while the UK would 'go on paying ... for as long as we can', he remained confident 'that when we can pay no more you will give us the stuff just the same'.<sup>4</sup> Such belief was held to an even greater extent regarding the UK's fellow belligerents within the Commonwealth, but rarely did the actual provision of such aid play out with the simplicity suggested by this Churchillian rhetoric. This analysis shows the unique financial opportunities and difficulties that dealing with the Dominions presented to London, and ultimately how the Dominions were collectively essential to the UK through their acceptance of sterling payment and their provision of gold and dollars (both US and Canadian).

## NOTES

1. Part I is derived, in part, from the chapter: I.E. Johnston, 'Gold and Dollars: Canada, South Africa and British War Finance, 1939–45', in A. Jackson (ed.), *An Imperial World at War: Aspects of the British Empire's War Experience, 1939–1945*, published by Ashgate (2016).
2. 1 billion pounds = £1000 million. Regarding currency (£, \$, etc.) in this volume, billion will be expressed as 'bn' throughout and million as 'm'.
3. The key economic advisor for the British government, John Maynard Keynes, in 1942 bemoaned that the UK had 'in fact ... borne the brunt of the financial sacrifice of the war and *literally alone* amongst the Allies will have suffered a serious reversal of our overseas financial position'. 'Our Prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942. D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 23: Activities 1940–1943: External War Finance* (London, 1979), p. 247.
4. W.K. Hancock & M. Gowing, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: British War Economy* (London, 1975), p. 119.

## Britain Financing the War

To understand the importance of the Dominions' economic contributions, they must be placed in the context of the UK's financial war effort. Finance in a total war is a secondary consideration to the overall economy. Its role is to ensure that the physical resources of the nation—such as manpower, raw materials and productive capacity—are as fully committed to the war effort as feasible.<sup>1</sup> It can provide for this positively, for instance by allowing the government to place large orders and stimulate munitions industries; or negatively, by taxation to remove the means of private individuals who otherwise might use their financial resources to make non-essential purchases that compete with war production. Handled correctly, finance is not a preoccupation, since its importance lies in not hampering the productive or military effort. Its primary function, the promotion of the war economy, is determined by strategic priorities. Mishandled, finance has the capacity to seriously curtail the war effort and undermine morale on the home front. The largest threat, inflation, is politically destabilising domestically and lowers the capacity to purchase crucial materials or munitions from abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Successful financial policy therefore places no artificial limit on the productive capacity of the nation, something that the UK largely achieved.<sup>3</sup> A secondary consideration is the impact that financial policy has on the post-war economy, because every financial transaction carries with it future implications.<sup>4</sup> Here the UK was much less successful—the position of the country was transformed from major creditor to large debtor, a significant post-war burden that curtailed British financial freedom after 1945.<sup>5</sup>

Explaining this transition in 1945, the ‘extraordinarily influential’ British economist and government advisor, John Maynard Keynes,<sup>6</sup> argued that ‘wisely or unwisely, we have waged war without regard to financial consequences deliberately and of set purpose. For better or for worse, it has been our own fault.’<sup>7</sup> Significantly, debt owed to the Dominions, however, was kept to a relatively low level, not compounding the UK’s post-war debt problems. Dominion financial aid was provided through gifts, only possible because of the cultural unity in the Anglo-Dominion relationships; and in exchange for existing British-held Dominion debt, the latter financial transactions allowing the UK to reap the benefits of its pre-1939 financial relations with the Dominions. The nature of Dominion financial aid was therefore important, in addition to its extent, and this was determined by the distinct Anglo-Dominion financial relationships.

The main lessons of financing a total war effort, largely precedents to avoid, were learnt during 1914–18. During the Great War, it was apparent as early as 1915 that private production was not meeting the munitions needs of the Allied nations and increasingly demand was placed on production in the USA.<sup>8</sup> This necessitated a large amount of American dollars that the UK could not provide; the war effort subsequently became progressively reliant on credit. Internally, financial policy failed, leading to rapid inflation. This in turn worsened the already bleak overseas situation, as the value of the pound plummeted: by 1918 it was worth two-thirds less than in 1914.<sup>9</sup> American credit was extended beyond US\$4bn,<sup>10</sup> placing a serious burden on the UK’s interwar balance of payments.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the UK sacrificed over 10 per cent of its overseas assets paying for the war, an important loss because the income accrued through investments was a long-standing and crucial element of the UK’s economy. Earnings from remaining invisibles—assets and investments abroad—met the needs of a persistent British trade deficit in the interwar period.<sup>12</sup>

The burden of debt proved tolerable until the Great Depression struck in the late 1920s. The 1930s were subsequently dominated by economic protectionism and stunted international trade, which became intertwined in popular and official memory with the attendant rise of fascist governments in Europe and beyond. The USA’s major wartime allies defaulted on their debts, and Washington responded by legislating against providing similar aid in the future.<sup>13</sup> The world therefore entrenched itself behind currency blocs of the dollar, sterling, mark and franc.<sup>14</sup> The UK comprised the centre of a loosely-constructed sterling bloc of nations which held their reserves as sterling in London and additionally developed an

overlapping imperial trade bloc following the 1932 Ottawa Imperial Conference.<sup>15</sup> The results gave members of the empire (including those outside the sterling bloc, most notably Canada) imperial preference—or rather imperial protection, since tariff barriers were raised to those outside the imperial fold.<sup>16</sup>

In London, lessons were drawn from these experiences. Inflation at home had proved dangerous to the capacity to secure resources from overseas. It would be checked as a matter of first importance in any future war. Overseas debts among allies were shown to be a dangerous prospect which led to acrimony and misunderstandings: in particular, London was bitter that three years of sacrificing men before the USA joined the war had not spared it a heavy financial burden, despite America's revolutionised position as a major creditor holding two-thirds of the world's gold;<sup>17</sup> Washington for its part was irate with perfidious Albion unilaterally writing off its substantial debts despite having willingly received indispensable financial aid in its moment of crisis. Furthermore, the importance of the imperial/sterling bloc as largely reliable and willing partners in trade and finance was recognised due to the interwar cooperation.

The UK entered the Second World War with more gold than in 1914, but overall in worse financial shape.<sup>18</sup> London's main problem in overseas purchases was finding dollars to continually access American resources and production. Hard currency and gold reserves dictated what could be bought abroad.<sup>19</sup> Despite the UK holding an estimated £3bn of overseas investments, not all were easily marketable, while only a limited number were held in hard currency countries.<sup>20</sup> Gold and cash reserves totalled around £525m, while dollar assets easily marketable were estimated as adding another £250m to the UK's hard financial resources.<sup>21</sup> This was plainly insufficient even at the outbreak of war—the Treasury, planning for a three-year war, was faced with a trade deficit with the USA of £400m in the first 12 months alone. Demand for American production was likely to rise in 1940–1. An inability to find the necessary dollars appeared probable as early as 18 months into the war. Indeed, to survive for three years, it was estimated that the UK required newly mined gold be sold to London at a rate of £120m a year, that the empire asked for very limited hard currency and that Canada provided at least £45m a year as credit for British purchases.<sup>22</sup> Initial planning sought to meet the dollar-gap by looking to sterling countries for imports (thus saving dollars) in combination with an export drive of the UK's most profitable manufactures to earn hard currency.

Such financial planning was abandoned as Western Europe collapsed in the face of Germany's attack in the summer of 1940. Caution gave way to necessity; survival was to come at any cost. Following the German conquests, the UK took over French contracts in the USA, totalling around £125m, and placed further significant munitions orders in North America on its own account.<sup>23</sup> Raw material purchases in the USA doubled and munitions purchases trebled.<sup>24</sup> The rate of expenditure was such that at the end of 1940 the UK's 'war chest' was virtually empty of gold and dollars. Faced with the threat of invasion, the UK sought to bring to bear whatever resources it could access from overseas, diverting its own resources and manpower completely towards a total war effort, regardless of the future economic implications.

The British predicament of payment was solved in March 1941 by Lend-Lease. As Churchill hoped, the USA removed the dollar sign from its contribution to the British war effort. Washington initiated a huge scheme of aid to allow those fighting the Axis powers to place orders in the USA for materials and equipment that could not be provided from other Allies or paid for any longer in gold and dollars. The scale of Lend-Lease made it one of the determining factors in the Allied victory—US\$27bn worth of materials was dispersed from America.<sup>25</sup> The country was the most important source of supply for the Allies.

The flow of resources was decidedly imbalanced, but not one-way. The UK embarked on a large-scale scheme of reciprocal aid to the USA, effectively creating a pool of Allied resources. The UK provided around US\$6bn of reciprocal aid for the USA, amounting to roughly 9 per cent of its war resources; American Lend-Lease to the British Empire was of a slightly larger proportion of the USA's resources, around 11 per cent, but its total financial value was much greater.<sup>26</sup> Since it was not just the UK that received Lend-Lease, it was expected that the other imperial nations, including the sterling area Dominions,<sup>27</sup> would similarly provide reciprocal aid. This provision of assistance formed an important method of indirect economic contribution to the UK's war effort by Australia and New Zealand particularly, because the USA was more generous with Lend-Lease it provided *even to the UK alone* based on what *the entire empire* supplied in return.

Lend-Lease was therefore one important pillar in the UK's financial effort. Another was the sterling area. The sterling area grew out of the interwar sterling bloc, mainly imperial but including Nordic and South American countries, all of which held reserves of sterling in London. These nations traded mainly in sterling and thus chose to peg their domestic currencies to sterling

following the UK's decision to leave the gold standard in October 1931.<sup>28</sup> The sterling countries could earn other currencies and gold in trade transactions, but largely sold these to the UK in exchange for improved sterling balances, creating a pool of hard currency controlled by London.<sup>29</sup> When a sterling area country subsequently required hard currency other than sterling for trade, it was allocated from this central pool in London, again in exchange for sterling. Since the majority of sterling bloc participants were also members of the British Empire—including New Zealand, Australia and South Africa—the currency bloc largely aligned with the imperial trading bloc. This trade and currency bloc solidified in the late 1930s when a run on sterling caused London to erect barriers around it and focus trade within the sterling area.<sup>30</sup>

The sterling area provided many potential advantages for the UK during the war. Pooled hard currencies offered the UK additional dollar resources, because it had access to the hard currency earnings of the entire sterling area. If the Dominions and colonies followed the British lead in import controls and restricted dollar purchases, thus asking for fewer dollars to be allocated to them from the central pool, then London would see more hard currency itself, whether it earned those dollars or not. This was significant because, at the outbreak of war, it was estimated that the rest of the sterling area (excluding the UK) was breaking even in its requirements and earnings of dollars.<sup>31</sup> The sterling area was also where the UK held the majority of its overseas securities, a large proportion ripe for domestic repatriation if the corresponding country built up large sterling balances at the UK's expense. And any accruing sterling obligations against London represented a post-war debt without any immediate burden on the UK, because the mechanism of trade in the sterling area merely added to or diminished the trading countries' sterling balances in any transaction. London's position of control further allowed it to prevent unlimited access to large sterling balances during the wartime crisis—the UK could thus accrue vast benefits in materials, munitions and services from sterling countries, placing the immediate burden on those countries, all in exchange for enhanced sterling balances which could not be used until the post-war period. For these reasons, the dollar shortage at the start of the war meant that sterling alternatives to North American production were actively sought.

These advantages, however, were mostly double-edged. The sterling area might earn dollars, but it could also add to the net deficit of dollars and thus put additional strain on London's position.<sup>32</sup> Implementing

comprehensive import control was not an easy task across such a broad range of countries. Each one had import needs specific to its own economy, so that any hard rules on import restrictions inevitably caused unfair damage to some countries.<sup>33</sup> The UK could only encourage import restrictions but could not dictate what, in particular, independent countries were allowed to import.<sup>34</sup> The securities held in the sterling area were also not exclusively beneficial—they suggested to outside observers, notably the USA, that the UK had vast untapped resources, when not all were easily marketable and liquidation was not always the best policy. And while it was easy to offer sterling payment against future obligations, this process was so simple and sterling countries were often so willing that balances soon snowballed into huge post-war obligations which left the UK with tremendous debt in 1945.

Nevertheless, sterling debts were not viewed as traditional obligations. London believed that sterling countries would not push too fast or too hard for repayment in the immediate post-war period, especially since the UK's financial position was obviously going to be so fragile that it could dictate the pace of repayment—if sterling creditors lent too heavily, the threat that London would cut some of its losses by devaluing the currency (and therefore their balances) loomed large. Indeed it was commented in London that the sheer scale of sterling deficits by the end of the war—over £3.3bn—was itself protection, since the losses risked by putting London under too much pressure were reason enough to follow the British lead.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore it was on the sterling area that the UK placed most of its post-war economic hopes.<sup>36</sup> The UK intended to direct its post-war trade towards sterling countries, hoping that trade surpluses would drive down its sterling deficits and keep its industries running. It is within the UK's wartime financial framework, notably Lend-Lease and the Sterling Area, that the Anglo-Dominion relationships must be placed.

## NOTES

1. In the words of Canadian Finance Minister J.L. Ilsley, the 'limits of an all-out war effort are physical and psychological not financial'. See *Press Promotion of War Finance*, Financing the War, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), J.L. Ilsley's departmental papers, RG-19-E1-e, vol. 2704.
2. R. Sayers, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Financial Policy, 1939–45* (London, 1956), pp. 1–6.

3. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the 'Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
4. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 1.
5. The UK stated that it was a net creditor to around £3.5bn when the war began and had transformed to a debtor with a £2bn negative balance by 1945. Most of this debt was owed not to neutrals, but to Allies. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the 'Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
6. R. Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes, Vol. III: Fighting for Britain, 1937-1946* (London, 2000), p. 135. See also G.C. Peden, *Keynes, the Treasury and British Economic Policy* (Basingstoke, 1988).
7. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the 'Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
8. W.K. Hancock & M. Gowing, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: British War Economy* (London, 1975), p. 3.
9. Hancock & Gowing, *British War Economy*, p. 9.
10. In this book, dollars (\$) will always refer to Canadian dollars, unless otherwise stated.
11. D. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill, 1981), p. 15.
12. Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 13.
13. Through the Johnson Act, enacted on 13 April 1934.
14. Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 269.
15. Following the agreements made at the Ottawa Imperial Conference, 41.2 per cent of British exports went to the Dominions in the period 1934-38 and 25 per cent of imports were received from this source. A. Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London, 2008), pp. 12-13.
16. F. McKenzie, *Redefining the Bonds of Commonwealth, 1939-1948: The Politics of Preference* (New York, 2002).
17. Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 271.
18. 'Note on the British Exchange Equalisation Account', 11 December 1939, T 160/981. See also Hancock & Gowing, *British War Economy*, p. 107.
19. Hard currencies were those that were used in international trade and expected to hold a relatively stable value. The UK did not expect hard



- currency countries to accept sterling as payment and declining British exports meant that the UK would earn less hard currency to purchase imports. At the outbreak of war, American and Canadian dollars, Argentinian pesos, Swiss, French and Belgian francs, Swedish and Norwegian kroners and Dutch guilders were all considered 'hard' by the UK. The hardest currency, however, was the USA dollar. For more on this, see Hancock & Gowing, *British War Economy*, p. 111.
20. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 363.
  21. Hancock & Gowing, *British War Economy*, pp. 115–116.
  22. 'Note on the British Exchange Equalisation Account', 11 December 1939, T 160/981.
  23. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 367.
  24. J. Hurstfield, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: The Control of Raw Materials* (London, 1953), pp. 182–3.
  25. D. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1991), p. 143.
  26. R. Overy, 'World Trade and World Economy' in I.C.B. Dear & M.R.D. Foot (eds), *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford, 2001).
  27. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.
  28. Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 14.
  29. 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 23: Activities 1940-1943: External War Finance* (London, 1979), p. 246.
  30. Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, p. 269.
  31. 'Note on the British Exchange Equalisation Account', 11 December 1939, T 160/981.
  32. 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, Moggridge, *External War Finance*, p. 245.
  33. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 19.
  34. 'Meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Dominions Secretary, Mr. Casey and Mr. Bruce, London, 24 November 1939', DO 35/1027/2.
  35. "'The old saying holds. Owe your banker £1,000 and you are at his mercy, owe him £1,000,000 and the position is reversed.'" Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 438.
  36. 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, Moggridge, *External War Finance*, p. 254.

## The Dominions and British Financial Relations

The Commonwealth was a unique subgroup of empire and its financial relations with the UK reflected this. As a group the Dominions shared important similarities that helped dictate their relationships with London, but the developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to significant diversity in Dominion economies. This chapter will draw out some of the similarities the Commonwealth group shared, while the analysis in subsequent chapters focuses on Dominion assistance, split by financial contributions of Canadian dollars, gold and sterling.

The British Empire was a traditional source of metropole wealth; however, the self-governing portions long enjoyed special status within this relationship.<sup>1</sup> High levels of finance flowed from the centre to the periphery, driving the original settler expansion—no continent received higher levels of British capital per head than Oceania between the middle of the nineteenth century and the Great War.<sup>2</sup> As Belich has noted, British investors were ‘somewhat Anglocentric’.<sup>3</sup> The development of Dominion status coincided with increased efforts at political, infrastructural and cultural nation-building, which still depended on high levels of external financial support,<sup>4</sup> often maintaining or even heightening Dominion economic reliance on the UK just as national developments themselves strained traditional bonds between the former settler-colonies and the mother country.

The economic protectionism of the 1930s furthered both trends of nationalism and imperial economic interconnectedness. The Dominions

looked to the UK and the empire to answer the problems of diminished world trade. The 1932 imperial conference in Ottawa, despite involving frequently acrimonious debates,<sup>5</sup> helped to formalise a system of imperial preference that largely gave the Dominions' exports privileged status in an increasingly guarded UK market.<sup>6</sup> Whether it was for guaranteed markets for primary products or to stimulate munitions industries, the Dominions expected that at the outbreak of war finance would flow out from the UK to the periphery as it had done for much of the previous century, assisting further industrial development as the Dominions transformed to various degrees into munitions-producing war economies.

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were all sterling area countries. All three Dominions developed along similar economic lines, establishing a dependence on a narrow range of agricultural exports as a primary source of income. By the Second World War, Australia was the most developed industrially, but not enough to consider becoming a major supplier of imperial munitions. It was the South African economy, however, which was the real exception of the three. The diamond (from 1870) and, overwhelmingly, gold (from 1886) industries dramatically changed South Africa's economy—in 1868 agricultural exports had made up 94 per cent of exports, but from the turn of the century to 1939 the export of gold made up 60 per cent of total exports in value and with minerals the combined total was around 75 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Agricultural exports represented less than 20 per cent of the total value in this same period.<sup>8</sup> The economy was built around gold: direct and indirect taxation on the industry made up over half of government revenue.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, this revenue was used to subsidise farming and manufacturing,<sup>10</sup> while infrastructure like the railway network and electricity grid developed in significant part around this central industry. The consistent value of gold gave South Africa's economy stability, because selling gold paid for imports crucial to virtually every industry in the country. Where the other Dominions struggled to recover from the effects of the Great Depression, particularly the fall in the price of agricultural exports, South African gold sales and external investment in the Union's gold-mining industry drove strong economic growth, which averaged almost 9 per cent per year in the period 1932–9.<sup>11</sup>

As a dollar country, Canada lay outside the sterling area and feared that it would suffer accordingly. At the outbreak of war, the UK turned to Canada before the USA for purchases, but Canada was correct to assume that London's prioritisation of the sterling area for imports above spending dollars in North America would limit early expenditure in the Dominion.

There was some exasperation in Ottawa at the UK's slow approach to Canadian purchases.<sup>12</sup> This was part of a strategy to limit British dollar expenditure—since certain items could only be purchased in Canada and thus were unavoidable expenditures, orders for Canadian exports available elsewhere were limited.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, Canada viewed its economic effort as potentially its most important contribution to the war effort. This was a policy of so-called 'limited liability', partly based on its expected capacity to provide financial and material support in lieu of dead servicemen.<sup>14</sup> Nor was this idea fanciful: the Dominion had proven a revelation in the Great War, displaying financial strength hitherto unrealised and a productive capacity that saw it supplying one third of British Army munitions on the Western Front by 1917–18.<sup>15</sup> In Ottawa it was therefore expected that the UK would stimulate Canadian munitions industries with large orders before the war began and certainly after the declaration had been made. In fact, on the outbreak of war, just a single factory was engaged in the production of munitions on UK account.<sup>16</sup>

Within the Dominions, financial policy was mainly dictated by what governments considered their populations would accept. In this regard, key strategic moments were of crucial importance in Anglo-Dominion financial relations. The fall of France raised sympathy for the UK's plight and the spectre of defeat inspired a more determined attitude in every Dominion. For Canada in particular this marked the end of the treasury-influenced limited liability policy. More significant for South Africa was the related event of Italian entry into the war. This brought the conflict to Africa, giving the ever-cautious Prime Minister Jan Smuts justification beyond the economic importance of the Commonwealth to rally South Africans.<sup>17</sup> The summer of 1940 was very significant in the South Pacific too; however, the truly seminal moment there was Pearl Harbor. Until that time, particularly in Australia, the coalition government—holding a tenuous majority—was indecisive on implementing heavy taxation and other financial measures for fear of its political punishment. From December 1941, just two months after the Labor Party came to office, the Australian public was clamouring for action that would protect the nation, whatever the cost.<sup>18</sup>

These defining moments show how the economic sphere brought together external finance with political considerations on the home fronts. Questions of what the Dominions would provide financially could have different answers depending on the strategic developments of the war and

the direct threat posed to the UK or any single Dominion. The perceived magnitude of the threat often dictated the extent of the sacrifices that governments could request and impose on their citizens.

How great were these sacrifices in the Dominions? A look at the proportion of national income directed to the war effort in one of the peak years, 1943–4, is instructive. A higher proportion of war expenditure generally equated with a reduction in the living standards of home front populations, particularly since the Dominions relied on public savings, taxation, domestic bank loans and the restriction of imports to fund the war. A contemporary sterling estimation of the various Dominion economies placed their overall income at £3.96bn, with £1.39bn—or roughly 35 per cent—of direct war expenditure. Individually, however, the percentages devoted to the war were: Canada 39.5 per cent; Australia 39 per cent; New Zealand 31 per cent; and South Africa, 15.3 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

The disparity is far from a straightforward comparison of sacrifice—generally the more industrialised the economy, the more costs that were classified as direct war expenditure. Primary exports, particularly important in the case of New Zealand, aided the British war effort substantially; while in South Africa the provision of gold, the keystone of the country's economy, was not a direct war expenditure but still crucial to the UK. Even these considerations, however, cannot disguise the most striking figure of 15.3 per cent—South Africa was significantly less willing to devote the same proportion of its income to the war effort at the expense of its citizens' living standards than were the other Dominions.

Dominion finance mattered to the UK because it was a significant source of hard currency and provided access to Dominion production, services, foodstuffs and raw materials. Canada was a source of some important war materials that could not be acquired elsewhere in bulk, notably nickel, in addition to exporting agricultural products.<sup>20</sup> It was also an 'arsenal of democracy', the largest producer of munitions outside of the USA, UK and Soviet Union, and moreover sent the largest proportion of the munitions it produced to other Allied armed forces. In all, the Canadian war machine provided some 8 per cent of the British Empire's arms.<sup>21</sup> In raw materials, services and munitions, by any relative measure, Canada's resources and commitment to employing its strength made it a truly valuable ally.

The munitions produced in the three southern Dominions were of a significantly smaller quantity—even with the addition of India, the total amounted to just 1.6 per cent of imperial armaments.<sup>22</sup> The munitions

produced early on, even in such small quantities, however, were of critical importance to the UK at a time when shortages abounded.<sup>23</sup> Location too increased the importance of their munitions contribution—supplies produced in, and relatively easily transported to, British forces in the Middle East and Asia saved the UK time and vital shipping capacity in a period when the latter was a limiting factor in all strategic plans.<sup>24</sup>

For the southern Dominions, building up larger munitions industries required manufacturing plant and machine tools. The usual and most obvious source for this equipment was the UK, but it was unwilling to divert these crucial resources so far from home during an emergency. Industrial development took off belatedly when imperial access to Lend-Lease freed some UK machinery or provided the Dominions with access to the necessary equipment and materials from the USA, but the overall munitions production was never the central aspect of these Dominions' efforts.

More important for the UK from the southern Dominions were services (particularly for shipping repair and maintenance), foodstuffs and raw materials. Australia and New Zealand contributed heavily through agricultural exports: the UK took 97 per cent of New Zealand's primary exportable produce before the war and the food the two Pacific Dominions transported to the British Isles in part facilitated the UK's own focus on industry over farming.<sup>25</sup> Of its agricultural exports, cotton generated the most revenue for South Africa, although its most valuable export for the UK was undoubtedly gold.<sup>26</sup> In services, South Africa's position on the Cape Route made it a crucial shipping hub for maintenance and repair. Through these exports and services the Dominions all had resources that the UK needed to sustain its war effort and for which payment had to be found.

Despite their differences, each Dominion showed a level of commitment to the UK's cause and each recognised that its own post-war position would be determined to some degree by how the Anglo-Dominion economic relationships emerged from the conflict. As a key post-war market for their exports, the Dominions shared the desire to protect the UK's financial position. Each recognised that a reasonable UK gold and dollar reserve was in its interests. Each did something to ease the immediate and long-term burden its military and economic contribution placed on London's resources.

As this chapter has highlighted, however, the similarities had their limits. In responding to a letter from Keynes on Anglo-Dominion economic relations, one Treasury official agreed that it 'would be tidy, and in many

ways desirable, if we could have a uniform system ... between the various members of the British Commonwealth of Nations', but concluded that 'there would be too many difficulties about this, and I think we have to deal with each case separately'.<sup>27</sup> Although the UK and the Dominions often cited related Anglo-Dominion agreements when bargaining during financial negotiations, dealing with each case separately was necessary throughout the war in most of London's financial dealings with the Dominions.

This was because finance was an area inextricably tied to domestic resources, geographical location and home fronts—the nature of Anglo-Dominion agreements did further distinguish the Commonwealth as a group within the empire but simultaneously necessitated that the Anglo-Dominion relationships be considered independently. The following analysis will therefore do the same. This summary of British war finance and the Commonwealth's economic ties sets the context. What remains to be seen is the extent of the Dominion economic contributions during the war, contributions that can be most helpfully classified in three distinct monetary groups: Canadian dollars, South African gold and Pacific Dominion sterling.

## NOTES

1. 70 per cent of British finance exported to the empire in the half-century before the Great War went to self-governing areas. L. Davis & R.A. Huttenback, 'The export of British finance, 1865-1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History (JICH)*, 13, 3 (1985), 28–76.
2. Almost all of this went to Australia and New Zealand. Davis & Huttenback, 'Export of British Finance'.
3. J. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 115–116.
4. National and economic development often went hand in hand in the Dominions. For Australia, see Dr H.C. Coombs, 'The Aftermath of War', Australia Correspondence, LAC, Mutual Aid Board papers, RG-36-21, vol. 29. See also, S.J. Butlin, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Series 4 – Civil, Vol. III: Australia War Economy, 1939-1942* (Canberra, 1955), p. 9.
5. B.J.C. McKercher, 'World Power and Isolationism: The North Atlantic Triangle and the Crises of the 1930s' in L. Aronson &

- B.J.C. McKercher (eds), *The North Atlantic Triangle in a Changing World: Anglo-American-Canadian Relations, 1902-1956* (Toronto, 1996), p. 121.
6. The proportion of tariff-free imports entering the UK fell from 83 per cent in 1930 to 25 per cent by 1932. D. Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill, 1981), p. 14.
  7. J.W. Garmany, 'Papers on Aspects of S.A. Economy before the War', UWH 1.
  8. Excluding gold from balance of trade, South Africa ran a large deficit, particularly with the UK and USA. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
  9. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
  10. Manufacturing was a subsidised industry from 1925. The lack of self-sufficiency in South Africa necessitated some 50 per cent of the machinery required to be imported, yet manufacturing exports accounted for just 2.5 per cent of the Union's total by value. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
  11. H. M. Robertson, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: The War & the South African Economy', UWH 1.
  12. Cabinet War Committee (CWC) meeting, 8 December 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. I; 8 December 1940, MG26-J13. See also, C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 30-1.
  13. J. Hurstfield, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: The Control of Raw Materials* (London, 1953), pp. 181-3.
  14. See 'Canadian War Policy', O.D. Skelton, 24 August 1939, RG25 D1, vol. 395, file 52. This document, written by the nationalist head of the External Affairs department, laid out possible methods of involvement in war for Canada and privileged financial and material assistance over contributions by the armed services. Canadian Prime Minister King largely agreed with its findings. See 3 October 1940, MG26-J13. The New Zealand government similarly had a policy of conscripting 'wealth before manpower'. J.V.T. Baker, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: The New Zealand People at War: War Economy* (Wellington, 1965), p. 30.
  15. R. Holland, 'The British Empire and the Great War, 1914-1918' in Brown, & Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 118.



16. H. Mackenzie, 'Sinews of War and Peace: The Politics of Economic Aid to Britain, 1939-1945', *International Journal*, 54, 4 (1999), 648-670.
17. Before the war came to Africa, South Africa's war budget for 1940 was a mere £14m. Upon offering to fight in East Africa, Pretoria accepted that this budget would need, as a minimum, to double, and quite possibly even treble in size. A.T.C. Snee, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
18. S.J. Butlin & C.B. Schedvin, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Series 4 - Civil, Vol. III: Australia War Economy, 1942-1945* (Canberra, 1977), p. 5.
19. A.J.B., 'Economic War-Efforts: V - The British Dominions', *Bulletin of International News*, 21, 8 (1944), 298-302.
20. Hurstfield, *Raw Materials*, p. 163.
21. A proportion that was as high as 10 per cent by 1945. H. Duncan Hall, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: North American Supply* (London, 1955), p. 428.
22. The southern Dominions—Australia, New Zealand and South Africa—were those located in the southern hemisphere. R. Sayers, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Financial Policy, 1939-45* (London, 1956), p. 553.
23. One official at the Ministry of Supply noted that there 'was a time when a few million rounds of small arms ammunition from India or Australia meant more to us than all the later billions from North America'. H. Duncan Hall and C.C. Wrigley, *The History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Studies of Overseas Supply* (London, 1956), p. 415.
24. See Part III.
25. W. David McIntyre, 'New Zealand', in Dear & Foot, *Companion to WWII*.
26. Gold, diamonds and wool alone made up a staggering 93 per cent of exports in 1934-5. J.W. Garmany, 'Papers on Aspects of S.A. Economy Before the War', UWH 1.
27. 'Financial Arrangements with the Dominions', S.D. Waley, 21 July 1942, UK War Financing in Canada and the US, TNA, DO 35/1029/6.

## Canadian Dollars

Canada was the pre-eminent Dominion in terms of wartime financial effort, supporting the UK with over \$5bn.<sup>1</sup> Canada benefitted from its geographical proximity to the USA and UK, its relatively large population, its natural resources and established industrialisation as it transformed itself into a major producer of armaments. More significant still, its financial strength allowed not just the UK, but indeed the entire sterling area, to continue accessing its large raw material and munitions exports long after the ability to pay had passed. Before the war, a plan of limited liability that privileged financial and material support over military commitments was formulated. In the event, the Dominion was capable of committing large armed forces on land, sea and air concurrent with this significant economic assistance. Nevertheless the aid provided was not as altruistic as the sums suggest; instead British requirements facilitated Canadian assistance in a form that benefitted both countries and protected Canada's long-term interests. First and foremost, it was the domestic economy and political considerations that determined the nature and extent of Canada's contribution.

Canada's interwar reliance on London for hard currency to finance American imports, earned by selling Canadian imports to the UK, ended quickly upon the outbreak of war. With a serious dollar-gap, the UK considered what North American imports it could restrict to save dollars, while Canada conversely sought action to ensure that the UK did not

reduce its Canadian expenditure.<sup>2</sup> Canada thus assured the UK that it would do what it could to finance the British shortage of Canadian dollars for purchases. During the first year of war, this entailed the provision of \$200m credit from the Canadian government, leaving the UK to find the means to pay the rest of the deficit, some \$40m–\$120m.<sup>3</sup> Ottawa's willingness to pay around two-thirds of the UK's deficit so early was a statement of intent regarding Canadian aid for the rest of the conflict.

More important still, Canada also accepted sterling, within defined limits, as partial payment.<sup>4</sup> This decision was the basis of the major programmes of financial aid that the Dominion subsequently provided. Canada ran a trade surplus with the UK and the sterling area, but influential neutrals like the USA would not accept sterling as payment—this meant that sterling was not a liquid currency for Canada in wartime. Accruing sterling balances in fact allowed the UK to build up a debt that could only be paid off post-war. Given the results of debts among Allies in the interwar period, this was considered highly undesirable, but accepted due to the wartime emergency and the wish to maintain British business in Canada. Mindful of the post-1918 story, one Canadian official warned the Cabinet War Committee (CWC) that any large sterling debt would 'never be paid in full or, possibly, in large part. Any reliance on this ... invites disappointment ... and ... later will create a bitter war-debt controversy. We know what that means.'<sup>5</sup> Canada therefore initially placed a strict limit on the amount of sterling it would accept as payment and added the proviso that this sterling debt would be paid down with the repatriation of British-held securities in Canada whenever possible.

The strategic crisis of mid-1940 completely transformed the UK's attitude; its reserves of dollars and gold were now committed to any immediate war expenditure deemed necessary. Nevertheless dollars and gold were mainly directed towards the USA, because Canada had already expressed its willingness to continue to supply goods even if the UK could not provide full payment. Although Canada still insisted on some hard payment to finance the necessary equipment and materials from the USA, which were used to expand Canadian production, this was not to any great extent.<sup>6</sup>

As British needs in Canada grew and hard currency dwindled, a sustainable method of payment was sought. Gold, for instance, covered only 10–15 per cent of total payments in Canada up to February 1942.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the sheer lack of gold in London meant that there was simply no more to spare for payment to Canada after December 1940.<sup>8</sup> Another method employed was the repatriation of British holdings in Canada.

The first securities to go in large proportion were Canadian debts to British bondholders, but other business interests and holdings followed.<sup>9</sup> British requirements fast outran what could be repatriated, however, and increasingly the major means of payment was Canada's acceptance of sterling balances—essentially Canadian credit.

The immediate burden therefore fell on the Canadian economy. British expenditure repeatedly forced up the limit of sterling that Canada agreed to hold and the idea of any ceiling figure was removed altogether in March 1941.<sup>10</sup> Ottawa therefore pledged to throw the main burden of financing the sterling area deficit upon its own resources, a move that allowed the UK to place orders freely in Canada without fear that the Canadian extension of credit would dictate a limit on purchases. Canadian Finance Minister James Ilesley claimed that it was simply 'unthinkable that any shortage of Canadian dollars should make it impossible ... for Britain to secure from Canada ... munitions and supplies'.<sup>11</sup>

There were several reasons why this situation was considered untenable. Like the UK, Canada learned during the Great War and the Great Depression that war debts among allies were fraught with complications. This was no less true with sterling balances. During the 1930s, Canada based its post-depression returning prosperity on an export drive, particularly aimed at the British market. This not only brought the nation internal wealth but also the American dollars to finance essential purchases in the USA. If Canada held significant post-war British debt, it would encourage the UK to restrict Canadian purchases after the Second World War and aim for its own (and a sterling area) surplus in trade with Canada to meet its obligations at the conclusion of hostilities. Put simply, holding huge British debt at the end of the war would seriously harm Canada because the UK was an important market for exports and a crucial source of American dollars.

By the end of 1941 the size of Canada's sterling balances and the rate at which they were increasing demanded some significant action,<sup>12</sup> particularly since the debt had reached a level considered uncollectable. Furthermore, Ottawa was increasingly worried by uninformed world opinion, which it felt would view Canada's acceptance of sterling payment as a demand of 'cash on a barrel head' from its close ally—much less generous than the USA's provision of Lend-Lease, in which terms of settlement remained unclear.<sup>13</sup>

Options to solve the accumulation of sterling included an increased repatriation scheme,<sup>14</sup> greater payments for Canadian forces based in the

UK, writing down British debt and the purchasing of British interests in Canada, but all of these actions had drawbacks and, even when combined, were considered insufficient to meet the British deficit. Instead, in January 1942, Canada announced a bold plan of a series of measures to aid the UK, which would be implemented from April.<sup>15</sup> The central provision was the Billion Dollar Gift (BDG)—a staggering \$1bn with which it was estimated the UK could continue to secure its share of Canadian output for over a year, free of charge. The size of the gift was truly huge in relation to the Canadian economy: during the life of the gift Canadian exports to the sterling area represented about 10 per cent of gross national product, the majority of which were accessed through the BDG. Furthermore, the sum of money was nearly *a quarter* of Canada's national budget in 1942–3.<sup>16</sup> In a deliberate act to court public and world opinion, the announcement of the gift preceded an American announcement on the terms of Lend-Lease, and the BDG's nature, without any need for settlement at the end of war, clearly trumped the American scheme as an act of generosity and largesse.<sup>17</sup>

Nor was this Canada's only financial provision to the UK—the gift ensured that the UK could access Canadian exports from April without Canada accumulating additional sterling balances; however, the outstanding balance still needed to be taken care of. Canada therefore extended its accumulated sterling as a dollar loan back to the UK. This meant a further provision of \$700m dollars, interest-free during the war, with the terms of post-war interest and repayment left to be decided after the conclusion of hostilities.

The BDG and dollar loan were calculated to allow the UK largely unfettered access to Canadian resources for 15 months. The rate of use, however, was much quicker than this, and it soon became apparent that the dollars would run out within a year, as the Allies prepared for the offensive phase of the war. Canada was therefore faced with the question of repeating or replacing the gift to meet future British needs. What emerged was a scheme of Mutual Aid, which provided access for the UK and other Allies to Canadian munitions production, foodstuffs and raw materials for the duration of the war, on a model of distribution similar to American Lend-Lease.<sup>18</sup> The factors behind the decision to provide the BDG, dollar loan and Mutual Aid are instructive of how Ottawa viewed financial aid and what influences dictated these decisions. The issues were largely decided by the government's concerns over the future of the Canadian economy and domestic public reaction to government initiatives, and the debate is worth examining in detail.

The alternative options all had their disadvantages. Writing off British debt meant Canada was providing significant wartime aid with little economic reward except potential future goodwill in trade negotiations. Writing down would entail a similar loss, but without removing all of the debt, which meant the remaining sums would still prove an impediment to future Anglo-Canadian trade. For this trade, Ottawa needed a financially healthy UK—the Deputy Finance Minister William Clark explained it was ‘most definitely in Canada’s selfish interests’ that the UK retained some strength and independence after the war: ‘We need a strong United Kingdom in the worst possible way. We need a United Kingdom which has some chance of struggling through to multilateralism in due course.’<sup>19</sup>

Greater repatriation was favoured as a partial solution: it was one use for Canadian surpluses in the 1930s;<sup>20</sup> it was part of the structure for financing British purchases before the BDG; it continued during the year that the BDG was in operation; and it remained part of the financial arrangements following the implementation of Mutual Aid. Repatriation was desirable because it lowered the country’s external debt and removed a burden on the balance of payments. Repatriating British debt also decreased British influence in Canada’s economy and businesses. This was perceived as a major boon by nationalists, who went so far as to suggest British financial interests affected politics in Ottawa;<sup>21</sup> but it was less appealing to imperial-minded officials who sought to maintain links with the UK and to economists who argued that maintaining a portion of the UK’s dollar-earning investments would provide disproportionate gains in post-war trade, whereas they claimed that the entire removal of British investments would seriously curtail British interest in Canada because trade followed investment.<sup>22</sup>

Repatriation was considered likely to be generally well received by the Canadian public. Its main limitation was that the UK did not hold enough in Canada: by December 1941 those holdings that remained were estimated at a value close to \$1.5bn, of which under \$300m would be relatively unproblematic to repatriate.<sup>23</sup> This was because private markets could not be flooded with bonds, which would decrease their value, and the government had political issues to consider over repatriating certain items in its own name.<sup>24</sup> The argument that maintaining some British holdings would encourage British trade was also accepted, so that repatriation as a method of meeting the British shortfall had virtually reached the end of the line by this time. Other purchases, such as British interests in Canadian munitions factories (which raised \$206m in 1943), were subsequently accepted as repatriation options dried up.<sup>25</sup>

Payment for Canadian overseas forces was another potential option, although insufficient to cover the whole British deficit. It was desirable because it gave Canada more control over its manpower and was one hallmark of a responsible independent nation. The costs of naval forces were already met, while the Canadian Army was relatively inexpensive during its training in the UK, before it saw sustained action in 1943 until the end of the war. The Army at least increased Canada's dollar expenditure in the UK, although London felt that it was underpaid for the costs it incurred when Canadian soldiers subsequently saw action.<sup>26</sup>

Most difficult was the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Initially Canada paid only for RCAF squadrons, although this excluded the RAF squadrons designated as RCAF, because the latter were still within the RAF structure.<sup>27</sup> Canadian airmen who served with the RAF were provided with subsidies from Ottawa to bring their pay in line with the more generous RCAF pay, while the British Air Ministry was responsible for payment only equal to the level of other members of the RAF.<sup>28</sup> For the reasons of control, independence and national pride, these expenditures were eventually taken over by Canada, although not until the initiation of Mutual Aid.<sup>29</sup> Previously, this step had been repeatedly rejected, highlighting how Ottawa was still cautious to ensure every transaction was decidedly beneficial for Canada before it was taken. As one report acknowledged, however, in terms of public opinion at least, this particular move was long overdue: the immediate public reaction provoked was thought likely to be 'disillusionment that ... Canada was not in fact meeting the cost of the squadrons being labelled as Canadian in the press reports at present'.<sup>30</sup>

With other options exhausted or unsuitable, the BDG was therefore considered the best possible scheme. This provided the UK with Canadian output, ensuring that British orders, which were driving Canada's economy, were not placed elsewhere and that the billion dollars were directed back into the Canadian economy. Aware that a suitably small debt still kept some claim on the UK, even if it was just used as a post-war bargaining chip and not actually reclaimed, the \$700m loan was considered to be sufficiently large without being prohibitive to future trade. Crucially, the accumulated sterling that formed the basis of the loan was converted into dollars, so that even if the UK were forced to devalue sterling post-war, the value of the loan to Canada would remain intact.<sup>31</sup> The generous nature of the BDG and loan were considered very important for world opinion, because Canada wanted to end the war with general goodwill in the interests of future global trade.<sup>32</sup>

In practice, the BDG worked well as a method of financial aid. Canada reaped the benefits it sought and the UK acquired indispensable war materials in return free of charge. Yet one year later, it was necessary for the gift to be altered slightly and rebranded. The story demonstrates the continuing concerns of the Canadian government for post-war economic advantage and immediate support from its electorate.

Contrary to expectations, the Canadian public's response to the BDG had been mixed at best, making a repeat gesture politically uncomfortable for King's Liberal government.<sup>33</sup> In Quebec, polls showed outright opposition to this method of financial aid, while even in English Canada the reaction was muted and by no means universally positive.<sup>34</sup> The main problem was the form, especially the name. A billion dollars sounded monumental; a gift is something for which you have no claim for reciprocation or benefit in return. When suggesting the gift, Canadian civil servants suggested that its value should be stressed to the public in terms of goods and supplies, the production of which were beneficial to the Canadian economy, not as free money.<sup>35</sup> Instead Canadian politicians emphasised the generosity of the act and its financial size. Ilsley, for instance, publicly declared it a 'free and unconditional gift from the people of Canada' to the UK.<sup>36</sup>

This was, of course, not empty rhetoric. The BDG was a monumental offer, large-minded and unstinting, more so than what the USA or others even within the Commonwealth were offering. The BDG was, however, also in Canada's own interests—it was conceived to be so and it was shaped to help Canada. Canadian production was geared towards British needs; it was British orders that were providing such wide employment and productivity. Furthermore the British market was seen in Ottawa as crucial to post-war prosperity and future high levels of exports. In the midst of the emphasis on the aid the BDG was providing for the UK, attempts to explain to the Canadian public the domestic benefits of the BDG became a secondary consideration and were easily lost.

Canada was already footing the cost of the majority of the British orders that were keeping so many factories open.<sup>37</sup> The BDG was essentially government investment in ensuring the continued massive production and employment in Canadian factories, in Canadian mines and on Canadian fields. The loan removed a burden on Anglo-Canadian post-war trade and gave Ottawa a helpful bargaining counter. To the public, however, it appeared that the Canadian government was not only handing over a large portion of its output to the UK free of charge, but was also giving away a prodigious sum of the nation's accumulated wealth.<sup>38</sup> The press attention



and criticism this received domestically ensured that the gift would not be repeated in the same form.<sup>39</sup>

A gift of this nature was considered uniquely feasible for the UK, due to Canada's 'close political and sentimental relationship' with the mother country.<sup>40</sup> But whatever some politicians thought, large sections of the Canadian public did not share these sentiments. Whereas American Lend-Lease helped all those nations opposed to the Fascist powers and therefore was harder for Anglophobes to undermine, Canada's gift helped only the UK—this suggested imperial, as much as wartime, considerations were behind it. It was easily portrayed by nationalists as inspired by excessively familial feelings for the stricken mother country; as aid that did not redound to the benefit of all the Allies; and, for many, it appeared to put the UK's needs ahead of Canadian interests. With the UK now additionally moving away from 'the centre of the stage' in the war, the Canadian government felt another direct gift would be simply too hard to sell to the Canadian public.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside public reaction, Canada cared about its position as a prominent trading nation in an open post-war world economy.<sup>42</sup> The Canadian government, when announcing the BDG, made several references to the benefits that the whole sterling area would enjoy.<sup>43</sup> This mattered because the sterling area was full of potential post-war trading partners, and it earned American dollars that could end up in Canada's reserves if wartime trade surpluses with the area persisted following the conclusion of hostilities. Indeed, one official report concluded that the importance of trade with the whole sterling area could 'scarcely be exaggerated ... to ... the future well-being of Canada'.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Canada's first gift was solely to the UK, however, did not escape attention within the Commonwealth, particularly because of London's selfish administration of the financial aid.<sup>45</sup> The UK considered that the BDG's main importance was in relieving its own position, a point that was contested, particularly in Canberra.<sup>46</sup> The UK chose to sell the Canadian dollars it was receiving for free to the rest of the sterling area to improve its own sterling position vis-à-vis the buying countries. Neither Canada nor the rest of the sterling area benefited from the UK's handling of the BDG, and this did little to enhance Canada's image in these countries. Canada thus feared that a repeat of the gift in its original form could seriously 'jeopardise Canada's post-war trade with the other Dominions'.<sup>47</sup>

Canada warned London that it would not favour the selling of its free dollars but,<sup>48</sup> despite Australian protests, Ottawa decided not to embarrass

the UK by pursuing its objections once the BDG was in action.<sup>49</sup> Australian objections were simply redirected to London,<sup>50</sup> where they were pursued until, in June 1943, the UK agreed to waive over \$24m of outstanding Australian debt to London.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Canberra's initial outrage was directed at its fellow Dominion—Australian External Affairs Minister Herbert Evatt subjected the Canadian High Commissioner to a diatribe on Canada's lack of Commonwealth unity and its consistent privileging of the UK,<sup>52</sup> wrapping the issue up with other grievances about arms supplied to China before Australia and the refusal of Canada to provide a token military unit when Japan was menacing Australian territory.<sup>53</sup> Evatt's points were grossly exaggerated, but at root they contained an element of truth. Some of this Australian feeling reached the American press, while Wellington also took issue with the distribution of dollars albeit more politely than Australia. New Zealand also contested a statement made by the Canadian government that New Zealand had received free aid through the BDG, a point that was, as the complaints highlighted, simply false.<sup>54</sup>

This international reception was the opposite of what Ottawa had intended. In formulating a new scheme of aid, it was decided that the UK should not be responsible for administering it to the whole sterling area and that, furthermore, Canada should also receive the benefits of supplying other allies like Russia and China directly.<sup>55</sup> This earned post-war goodwill for the Dominion in many countries, placated the other disgruntled Dominions and removed domestic criticism of the privileged position of the UK.<sup>56</sup> Canada's concern about the reaction around the whole Commonwealth shows how important considerations of future trade were. With South Africa too, despite the fact that Ottawa knew the Union could pay for all of its requirements in Canada, Mutual Aid was offered for the majority of exports solely for the rationale of encouraging future trade with its fellow Dominion.<sup>57</sup> As an exporting country, Canada always kept potential trade considerations at the forefront. Any state receiving Canadian aid now was more likely to view Canadian exports kindly when the new era of world trade began.

The majority of Mutual Aid, initiated in May 1943, still went directly to the UK. It was, however, received much more kindly—even by French-Canadians—than the BDG. Undoubtedly terminology again played its part, this time favourably: 'Mutual' suggested a reciprocal arrangement; 'Aid' was charitable and more appropriate for allies at war than a gift. The billion dollar appropriation was not mentioned in the title because Mutual

Aid would be rolling until the conclusion of hostilities and, perhaps most important of all, it was for the Allies, not just the United Kingdom.<sup>58</sup> The delivery placed emphasis on the nature of the aid: ‘Under Mutual Aid Canada ... does not give money or credit to other countries’, the ‘money voted to the Mutual Aid Board goes ... to the wage earner and farmer’.<sup>59</sup> Despite the fact that the UK had received a similar amount of financial assistance in almost an identical manner the year before, Mutual Aid was accepted relatively uncritically in Canada. Indeed, Mutual Aid was not very well known around the Dominion and did not stir similar press attention to the BDG.<sup>60</sup> By the end of the war, Canada had spent almost \$2bn on Mutual Aid for the UK and the Commonwealth.<sup>61</sup>

The unstinting wartime support Canada provided for the UK is best summarised by the substantial figures involved. On top of \$2bn for the UK and the rest of the sterling area, Canada provided the BDG and the \$700m interest-free loan. The UK spent a further \$1.6bn in Canada by paying gold and dollars, through the Canadian repatriation of British assets, and, most important of all, by Canada accruing sterling balances. The \$4bn from Mutual Aid, the dollar loan and the BDG was roughly equivalent to two-thirds of the sterling area’s requirements in Canada during the war.<sup>62</sup> Canadian generosity (and self-interest) did not stop at these measures—the UK’s outstanding debts of \$1.2bn were written down after the war and Ottawa further offered London a \$1.25bn dollar loan to help maintain purchases in Canada during the reconstruction phase.<sup>63</sup> Canada could afford such action because its production had boomed during the war and its relationship with the USA had left it in a similarly safe position regarding hard reserves in 1945 compared to that of 1939.<sup>64</sup>

Canadian provision for the UK was therefore staggering—over \$5bn, or roughly £1.125bn, during the war. This was a truly substantial source of external finance that allowed the UK to keep purchasing food, raw materials and munitions in Canada. The BDG, whatever the Canadian rationale, was an example of munificence that was not matched in any other Allied exchange during the war. London described it in such terms: ‘more generous than that employed by any other member of the British Commonwealth or Ally’.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless the fundamental reason for this aid was continually its benefit to the Canadian economy, as London was well aware.<sup>66</sup> In 1939, the UK was implored to keep making purchases in Canada—the British outlet for Canadian production was why the provision of credit began. The Canadian economy quickly relied on large British orders and

sustaining these purchases became vital for Canada. The generosity of the BDG was in line with Canada's goals for developing its economy; the loan was viewed as an eventual bargaining chip; British debt was kept down precisely so it could eventually be repaid, or at least to prevent it becoming an impediment to future Canadian exports to the sterling area. The BDG was altered to Mutual Aid on the basis of domestic public opinion and to enhance the potential of Canadian trade in the post-war world. Canada was undoubtedly the most generous Dominion in terms of the level of its provision, but its generosity represented, as one Canadian historian has argued, an 'enlightened self-interest'.<sup>67</sup>

### NOTES

1. The \$ symbol represents Canadian dollars throughout the chapter, unless otherwise stated (as US\$). Conversion rate: £1 = \$4.45.
2. Crerar to King, 7 November 1939, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3992. For more on the Canadian Department of Finance, see R.B. Bryce, *Canada and the Cost of World War II: The International Operations of Canada's Department of Finance, 1939-1947* (London, 2005).
3. 'Memorandum made up by the Bank of England during visit of G.F. Towers, December, 1939', W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3971.
4. Crerar to King, 7 November 1939, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3992.
5. 'The Problem of Sterling Balances', 19 June 1941, LAC, RG-2-7-C, vol. IV. Prime Minister King expressed similar sentiments. British High Commissioner in Canada to DO, 23 January 1942, PREM 4/44/9.
6. These imports were desperately needed because Canadian production was so reliant on American assistance. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 49.
7. 'Proposal for Reducing Canada's Accumulating Sterling Balances', W.L. Gordon, 11 December 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. VI.
8. Keynes to Hopkins, 14 March 1941, D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 23: Activities 1940-1943: External War Finance* (London, 1979), p. 50.
9. 'Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to Britain', A2908, A67/15, PART 1.

10. Sterling – Canadian Dollar Relationship, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 3971.
11. ‘Canada’s Billion Dollar Gift to Britain’, J.L. Ilsley, Address to the Canadian House of Commons, 18 March 1942.
12. From September 1939 to the end of November 1941 the UK’s total adverse balance in trade was \$1.483bn. This was met by repatriation (\$398m); the sale of securities (\$48m); private capital payments (\$457m); payment in gold and US dollars (\$250m). The difference, some \$728m, was accepted in sterling. W.L. Gordon, 11 December 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. VI.
13. ‘Financial arrangements between Canada and the United Kingdom’, 10 August 1944, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 4369.
14. This was also described as being not far removed from accumulating debt and again termed as Canada receiving ‘cash on a barrel head’. ‘Financial arrangements between Canada and the United Kingdom’, 10 August 1944, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 4369.
15. The War Appropriation (United Kingdom Financing) Act, 1942.
16. H. Mackenzie, ‘Transatlantic Generosity: Canada’s “Billion Dollar Gift” to the United Kingdom in the Second World War’, *The International History Review*, 34, 2 (2012), 293–314. See p. 309.
17. CWC meeting, 15 December 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. IV.
18. American assistance was also required for Canada. Ottawa’s bold policies of aid to the sterling area were only possible because of the Canadian–American Hyde Park Agreement of April 1941, which secured a minimum (and maximum) Canadian balance of American dollars, maintained through American purchases in Canada. It also provided for the American materials that went into Canadian-manufactured munitions for the UK free of charge. For Canada’s worries over its dollar reserves, see ‘Canada-USA-U.K’ financial arrangements, incl. Hyde Park Agreement’, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 3971.
19. ‘Financial arrangements between Canada and the United Kingdom’, 10 August 1944, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 4369.
20. ‘Memorandum on Financial Aspects of Negotiating with United Kingdom’, October 1939, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
21. ‘Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942’, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
22. ‘Financial Arrangements with the United Kingdom (and other countries)’, 15 December 1942, MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.

23. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
24. Notably debt tied to Canada's rail network or municipalities was thought an unsound acquisition because it entailed the federal government taking on forms of national ownership and debt that amounted to domestic policy decisions. 'Financial Arrangements with the United Kingdom (and other countries)', 15 December 1942, MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.
25. UK War Financing in Canada: Acquisition of UK owned Munitions Plants, DO 35/1218.
26. 'Outline of Discussions Towards a Financial Settlement', 1 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
27. For more on the Canadian squadrons within the RAF, see Part II.
28. Economic Advisory Committee (EAC) meeting, 26 June 1941, RG 19, vol. 4660.
29. 'Financial Arrangements with the United Kingdom (and other countries)', 15 December 1942, MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.
30. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
31. 'Proposal for Reducing Canada's Accumulating Sterling Balances', W.L. Gordon, 11 December 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. VI.
32. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
33. 'Financial Relations with Canada', July 1942, DO 35/1029/6.
34. The results of a Gallup Poll are recorded in a Dominions Office note on 'The "Billion Dollar Gift"', 9 September 1942, which showed that only 53 per cent favoured a second gift and 35 per cent were against it. DO 35/1029/6.
35. 'Proposal for Reducing Canada's Accumulating Sterling Balances', W.L. Gordon, 11 December 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. VI.
36. 'Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to Britain', J.L. Ilsley, Address to the Canadian House of Commons, 18 March 1942, A2908, A67/15, PART I.
37. British High Commissioner in Canada to DO, 23 January 1942, PREM 4/44/9.
38. Heeney to Clark, 9 September 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
39. One Australian official succinctly summarised that it was 'found politically inexpedient' to repeat the gesture. Mr. Moore to Mr. Macgregor,

- Commonwealth of Australia War Supplies Procurement, 29 January 1943, A2908, A67/15, PART 1.
40. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
  41. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
  42. For Canada's post-war trade policy, see R. Bothwell & J. English, 'Canadian Trade Policy in the Age of American Dominance and British Decline, 1943-1947', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 8, 1 (1977), 52-65.
  43. 'Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to Britain', J. L. Ilsley, Address to the Canadian House of Commons, 18 March 1942, A2908, A67/15, PART 1.
  44. Cash Positions: Sterling Area, RG-36-21, vol. 15.
  45. Clark to Robertson, 1 September 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  46. Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to Britain (Canadian Mutual Aid), A2908, A67/15, PART 1; DO to the British High Commissioner in Canberra, DO 35/1029/6.
  47. 'Financial Arrangements with the United Kingdom (and other countries)', 15 December 1942, MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.
  48. Clark to Robertson, 1 September 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  49. Clark to MacGregor, 16 November 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  50. Clark to Robertson, 14 October 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  51. This was a compromise after an initial claim for \$60m. For the negotiations over this settlement see Canada's Billion Dollar Gift to Britain (Canadian Mutual Aid), 2908, A67/15, PART 1; DO 35/1029/6.
  52. High Commissioner for Canada, Canberra, to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada, 28 August 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  53. High Commissioner for Canada, Canberra, to The Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa, 13 October 1942, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3992.
  54. See correspondence between Nash and Ilsley, beginning 26 January 1943, Economic Aspects - Finance - General, EA1 712, 91/3/1, Part 1.

55. The UK apparently did not learn the lesson, as Canada was forced to rebuke it again for transferring munitions it received free through Mutual Aid as a British gift to Russia. Letter from Mr. Ralston, Minister of National Defence, 14 December 1943, MG 27 III B 20, vol. 2, folder 4.
56. 'Preliminary notes re Sterling Problem, 10 December 1942', W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
57. 'Illustration of how Distribution of Mutual Aid to Sterling Area might be based on particular circumstances of each part of area', R.B.B./A.M., 4 June 1943, W.C. Clark departmental papers, vol. 3436.
58. 'Financial Arrangements with the United Kingdom (and other countries)', 15 December 1942, MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.
59. 'Report of the Canadian Mutual Aid Board for the Period Ending March 31, 1944', MG 27 III B 20, Vol. 2, folder 4.
60. H. Mackenzie, 'Sinews of War and Peace: The Politics of Economic Aid to Britain, 1939-1945', *International Journal*, 54, 4 (1999), 648-670, p. 661.
61. Mackenzie, 'Sinews of War and Peace', p. 669.
62. R. Sayers, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Financial Policy, 1939-45* (London, 1956), p. 362.
63. This included writing off \$425m of outstanding UK debt related to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. See H. Mackenzie, 'The Path to Temptation: The Negotiation of Canada's Reconstruction Loan to Britain in 1946', *Historical Papers*, (1982), 196-220.
64. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, p. 362.
65. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
66. 'Outline of Discussions Towards a Financial Settlement', undated, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
67. Mackenzie, 'Sinews of War and Peace', p. 668.



## South African Gold

The considerations behind South Africa's financial support were akin to those that influenced the Canadian government. The similarities included concerns about maintaining the current government's power, upsetting public opinion and the strength of the domestic economy, both present and future. Crucial differences existed between the two Dominions' economies and internal politics, however, which caused the level of South African aid to be radically lower than that provided by Canada.

The conditions in South Africa led to very different decisions on financial provision: the government's political opposition was more dangerous; public opinion was more divided; and the future of South Africa's economy was understood to rest on the power of exporting gold, not on international goodwill and foreign export markets. In Canada, the benefits of financial aid were felt in the domestic economy immediately—the BDG and Mutual Aid consisted of government money spent on production in its own economy, the output of which formed the gift. In South Africa, where the UK needed gold more than munitions, foodstuffs and raw materials, this complementarity was not possible. What benefitted the UK did not necessarily help the Union, and relations were therefore much more difficult.

South Africa was a sterling Dominion, like Australia and New Zealand, but it had a more complicated relationship with the sterling area. Gold made up over 70 per cent of the Union's exports by value between 1932

and 1939, and the mineral gave the country significant financial independence.<sup>1</sup> In most of the sterling area, gold, along with other hard currencies produced and earned, was automatically sold to London for sterling, adding to the whole area's central pool of reserves.<sup>2</sup> Following the Great Depression, South Africa decided to peg its currency to British sterling but in 1934, the Union further legislated to hold its own gold as a national reserve, only selling it to the sterling area when trade required it.<sup>3</sup> The Union effectively kept one foot out of the currency bloc because it could use its gold to trade independently of the sterling area.

Union overseas trade increasingly diversified in the interwar years, but by the outbreak of war, the UK and the British Empire remained its largest export markets.<sup>4</sup> Even with South Africa's significant degree of financial independence, lack of interest in the fate of the sterling area was therefore not possible. Minerals, particularly gold, remained the Dominion's most valuable commodity by a considerable measure, but the traditional settler-colony and mother country relationship had not totally disappeared. The UK still took the majority of the Union's agricultural exports: while gold-mining employed around 5 per cent of the white and 7 per cent of the non-white population, agriculture, forestry and fishing employed 25 per cent and 64 per cent of these populations respectively.<sup>5</sup> The importance of gold therefore had its limitations, and the Union still required export markets for other goods to maintain its employment levels.

Other links persisted. The UK owned valuable business interests in the Union, including in the gold mines, which tied the two countries together. And even though South African gold was not automatically sold to the UK, most of the Union's gold production found its way to the sterling area's pool in London because the Union's import needs made it one of the world's least self-sufficient countries.<sup>6</sup> The resulting trade imbalance with the UK ensured that a large and steady flow of gold continued to move from South Africa to London. The relationship was such that South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts emphasised the economic benefits of the Commonwealth as a reason for South African belligerency.<sup>7</sup> This argument, however, later limited his room for economic manoeuvre in the face of vocal opposition and split public opinion when home front sacrifices were necessary.

The main resource that the UK required from the Union during the war was gold.<sup>8</sup> The basis for this requirement shifted through the various stages of the conflict. Initially, South African gold was required as hard currency for payment to sustain the UK in its plan for a three-year war.

London estimated it required £120m of gold per year from the sterling area to finance the war. Of this, South Africa would deliver the majority, at least £90m every 12 months.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, the UK directed part of its early export drive towards the Union, along with a campaign to 'Buy British' in South Africa, which, by one account, reached 'absurd proportions'.<sup>10</sup> Following the fall of France, the British need for hard currency became dramatically greater—the UK now sanctioned steps to obtain South African gold that it had been reluctant to take earlier, including receiving gold in return for the repatriation of South African debt and other British-held interests in the Union.<sup>11</sup>

Lend-Lease transformed the picture. The USA wanted the UK to scrape the barrel of exchange, not just in London but also around the empire. In March 1941, under American pressure, the UK made its first formal request for an option to buy the entire output of South Africa's gold mines.<sup>12</sup> Pretoria rejected this outright. Unable to force South Africa to relinquish its reserves through British pressure, Washington took dramatic steps to acquire whatever it could from the Union,<sup>13</sup> including sending an American warship to collect gold produced on British account directly from South Africa.<sup>14</sup> In this early Lend-Lease phase of the war, holding gold in London could cost the UK in Lend-Lease provision from the USA, because the latter legitimised providing such aid to Congress on the basis of London's empty reserves. Gold acquired from the Union was usually already earmarked for purchasing imports before it arrived. The Dominions Office (DO) noted that the Treasury was in a 'cleft stick' in this period—gold offset overseas liabilities but could equally cause the USA to reduce Lend-Lease provision.<sup>15</sup>

In 1943, the USA accepted London's argument that a gold and dollar reserve of some substance was required by the UK. During this final phase, dollars earned by sterling area countries hosting large American military forces were sold to London. The acquisition of gold and dollars was considered crucial for two reasons: the first, that it would be essential for the immediate post-war era when the UK would be short of hard currencies and not able to rely on other countries continuing to accept rising sterling debts;<sup>16</sup> the second, which held throughout the war, was the perception that neutrals and sterling area countries assumed the UK was receiving the majority of South Africa's gold each year, around £100m, underwriting confidence in sterling through its addition to the sterling area's hard currency reserves. London considered this central to the UK's ability to build up billions of pounds worth of

sterling debt around the world. Its importance was therefore difficult to underestimate.<sup>17</sup>

The UK did acquire sufficient gold from the Union to finance the war; however, it was always denied the quantity it desired, and the financial relationship was decidedly imbalanced to the Union's benefit. Despite repeated pleas from the UK, the Union was exceptional among the Dominions in its refusal to accept the accrual of sterling balances as payment throughout the war and, in fact, initially ran down what little sterling balances it had in London.<sup>18</sup> Looking at gold alone, the Union could be viewed as pursuing such actions purely on the grounds of its own economic interests. When taking other financial negotiations into account, notably payment for the Union's overseas forces, it is apparent that the influences on government policy significantly included public opinion and the political opposition, in addition to the economy.

The Union provided the UK with substantial amounts of gold: £90m a year from 1939–41; approximately £40m in 1942; and, for 1943–5, the UK had the option to buy a further £90m a year. Gold never lost its importance to the UK; however, the latter option was never fully exercised—in part because the Union simply refused to accept sterling for gold (or in other words to relinquish gold for credit).<sup>19</sup> Since the UK was receiving around the same level of gold pre-war as during the period 1939–41, with the exception of 1942 there appears to be little cause for complaint.

What then were the UK's issues? First, the gold that London could acquire was sold to the UK in exchange for currencies other than sterling, or for British and sterling area exports. This was, in the latter case, a direct trade transaction; in the former, it was just a straight exchange of financial resources. There was no sacrifice, even partial, for the war effort by the Union in these transactions. Moreover, the Union was producing gold at a comfortably higher rate than it was selling it to the UK—the excess that was not necessary for the Union's trade purposes simply accrued in South Africa's reserves and was not employed in the war effort.<sup>20</sup> Nor were the Union's reserves dwindling, even as the UK's were completely exhausted: the country argued it required a base level (£90m) of gold to underwrite current and future economic commitments, and from the middle of the war, kept its reserves substantially above even this level.<sup>21</sup> The UK, spending all of its resources in the war, was disappointed that the same measures were not taken by a fellow belligerent, ally and Commonwealth member. London felt it had a moral claim—in addition to a Commonwealth and

imperial claim—to this gold for the war effort, particularly the excess gold above that which was claimed to be essential economic insurance (a luxury with reserves that London itself did not enjoy).<sup>22</sup>

Further issues arose because the Union pursued repatriation in exchange for gold to an extent that almost entirely removed the UK's interests in the country. Repatriation of British-held debt for gold was initially suggested by the UK, as one possible means of acquiring gold in a time of emergency immediately before Lend-Lease aid was received. Even then, this was only suggested to a limited extent.<sup>23</sup> Pretoria subsequently tied future financial deals to the continuance of repatriation, which was nearly completed in its entirety by the end of the war. Where other Dominions perceived that such actions were taking advantage of the UK's predicament and removing the UK's financial links with their countries, the Union had no such reservations. From London's viewpoint this was, once again, simply the exchange of one asset for another, and the securities the UK lost reduced its continuing capacity to acquire gold from South Africa in the post-war period.<sup>24</sup> The UK was therefore disappointed with numerous actions: that South Africa was so willing to use London's weakness to sever financial ties; that the Union would not accept sterling balances, which the rest of the sterling area and many neutrals were doing, in exchange for gold; and that the Union was using the war emergency to build up its reserves and reduce its external debt. One critic of South African financial relations with the UK, Keynes, claimed that South Africa had 'profiteered out of the war remorselessly, for all General Smuts' fine words (perhaps because of them)'.<sup>25</sup>

These points were driven home in 1942, when the UK received just £40m of South Africa's gold.<sup>26</sup> Pressure from Washington on the Union to divert its machinery and manpower to war industries resulted in falling output from South Africa's gold mines, because the USA refused to supply critical mining materials such as steel. This was effective, but hurt other areas of the economy too: for instance, the lack of steel created shortages for the railway network, which in turn lowered the efficiency of the Union's ports.<sup>27</sup> The USA shut its gold mines completely to release manpower and machinery for the war effort and expected others to follow its lead—Canada and Australia partially complied, without ever accepting that full closures were necessary.<sup>28</sup> In South Africa there was outright refusal: gold underwrote the entire economy.<sup>29</sup>

The USA instead suggested that the Union could release more gold to the UK if production was not cut (gold which would, in large part,

subsequently end up in Washington's coffers). Pretoria remained intransigent on the point. It defined its 'excess' production as the gold it released to the UK, not the gold it was using to steadily build its reserves.<sup>30</sup> Any fall in production would reduce what went to the UK (and therefore Washington).<sup>31</sup> In 1942 the UK was sold just £40m, to display how the Union's shortages would primarily affect its allies.<sup>32</sup> Hurt by the loss of gold and anxious to prevent a new trend of diminished gold sales, the UK agreed to defend Pretoria's position on gold production in Washington and allow South Africa to repatriate two-thirds of the remaining British-held debt, in exchange for securing a firm arrangement on the option of £90m gold sales in subsequent war years.<sup>33</sup> The incident neatly defined the Union's order of priorities, with the UK and the war effort ranking comfortably below its own domestic interests.

To fully understand the Union's approach it is therefore important to consider South Africa's home front. The main issue for the South African government was its vocal right-wing opposition. Unlike in Canada, the white population most likely to oppose the war, the Afrikaners, outnumbered those of British origin and descent. Furthermore, disenfranchised non-whites—who made up around 80 per cent of the total population—were most often ambiguous about the war effort at best. Smuts was relatively secure with voters of British heritage, but needed to court enough of the Afrikaner population to maintain power. The UK was acutely sensitive to Smuts' position, because his opposition supported neutrality and cutting ties with the Commonwealth. Smuts came to power narrowly in September 1939 off the back of a resolution to fight the war, using the economic benefits of the Commonwealth connection in debates.<sup>34</sup> Any subsequent reduction in living standards within the country could easily be utilised by the opposition to unsettle Smuts' fragile support and undermine the war effort.

While London appreciated the difficulties Smuts' government faced, it still appeared that the Union government could contribute much more. Budgets delivered by the South African Minister of Finance, Jan Hofmeyr, were routinely and often scathingly criticised by UK officials: the 1943–4 budget, for instance, was labelled by the British High Commissioner in South Africa as the 'annual tragi-comedy'.<sup>35</sup> Union government spending and taxation were low by Commonwealth standards—its rate of tax, for instance, was around 60 per cent of the average level across the rest of the Commonwealth. Of complete tax revenues, 40 per cent came directly from gold-mining, and indirect taxes on the industry took the total it

raised to well over 50 per cent. Put simply, tax on individuals was low and this suggested, certainly from an overseas perspective, that there was room for increased taxation and expenditure on the war. Such measures, despite lowering living standards, were being employed elsewhere to hold down inflation and restrict individuals from non-essential purchases. In South Africa it was very much 'business as usual' for the economy.<sup>36</sup>

The issue was that the majority non-white population held a very small portion of the country's wealth; any significant tax rises would therefore need to fall on white South Africans to be effective. The white population was bitterly divided on participation in the war; it held the power to make political change; and it had, to some degree, been sold on the war effort by the economic benefits Commonwealth membership wrought. White South Africans were accustomed to relatively little state interference through taxation and had just experienced seven consecutive years of impressive economic expansion and rising living standards. Revenue through taxation of individuals, a controlled economy, and heavy government expenditure on the war were all fraught with political risk for the South African government. Pretoria repeatedly used this rationale to deflect pleas from the UK to release gold or institute an automatic system of gold in exchange for sterling.<sup>37</sup>

The Union's intransigence also had a firm economic basis. Whereas in Canada, permitting unlimited sterling accrual was undesirable but accepted in order to keep production booming, an automatic system of sterling in exchange for gold lacked any similar rationale in South Africa: in Canada the benefits permeated the entire economy; in South Africa there would be no comparable effect. Gold was South Africa's primary export, a valuable source of international exchange which provided the country with a degree of financial independence; in contrast, unlimited sterling balances could harm post-war trade with the UK and would tie South Africa to the UK and the sterling area, a development that would undermine the moderate Afrikaner support Smuts enjoyed.

Worse still, any large sterling balances accrued would need to be written down or, at the very least, would prove inaccessible in their entirety in the immediate post-war period, given the huge sterling debts the UK was building globally. Put simply, South Africa would be acquiring balances of little immediate value and dubious future worth in exchange for a very valuable commodity which allowed it to trade internationally, all without any real benefit to its internal economy.

The Union thus agreed to provide gold only where it benefitted its economy.<sup>38</sup> Such a stance was difficult for the opposition to attack. Repatriation of British-held debts and business interests in the Union in exchange for gold was one such move. Repatriation made financial sense for South Africa: reducing external indebtedness was good for the country, took the corresponding interest charges off future balance of payments calculations and furthermore reduced South Africa's economic ties to the UK. The latter reason particularly appealed to the Afrikaners Smuts was trying to court.

Gold negotiations show the government's concern for the economy and public support. Looking at payments for South Africa's forces highlights how far this attitude extended, to the point of taking advantage of the war situation in spite of existing agreements and obligations. Commonwealth policy, established in repeated interwar imperial conferences, dictated that each Dominion paid for its own forces in the field, the size of which it was free to determine. With Canada, for example, this arrangement was complicated only when Canadians were detached from the Canadian armed forces and served directly with the RAF. Australia and New Zealand debated issues such as the capitation rate for their soldiers in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Although the UK never felt that any Dominion actually met the initial costs that London had to bear for Dominion servicemen,<sup>40</sup> for Canada, Australia and New Zealand—with the exception of special cases like BCATP graduates—the principle of payment was not contested and the financial remuneration provided for the UK was considered in reasonable proximity to the total costs.<sup>41</sup>

South Africa was the exception. Smuts at first expressed a willingness to follow the established principle for payment of overseas forces, when South Africans took part in large numbers in the East African campaign against Italian forces, stating that South Africa would 'abide by the principle of our financial liability in the same way as other Dominions are financially liable for their contingents overseas'.<sup>42</sup> This was sold to the domestic electorate as being in the interests of South Africa's regional defence. South Africa was supplying stores and equipment for the campaign in addition to its personnel, as was the UK, so for costs above the pay and allowances of South African troops, the two countries agreed upon a 50–50 basis of payment. This was a reasonable and uncomplicated distribution of costs.<sup>43</sup>

Problems arose when forces were sent to North Africa. Domestically, the political opposition questioned how battles in Egypt and Libya were in South Africa's interests—this was, by their account, an imperial war that



South Africans were dying for, and paying for.<sup>44</sup> Pretoria now adopted a completely different attitude. Smuts' earlier acknowledgement of the principle of paying for forces was claimed to be a limited pledge for East Africa, not relevant to the Middle East.<sup>45</sup> For the UK, full compensation of initial expenditure was of double importance. As well as reducing its huge costs, the payment was made in gold. The UK thus urged the Union to take into account the 'standards set up by other parts of the Commonwealth, whose ability to aid is in fact less rather than greater'.<sup>46</sup>

The UK was told that South Africa was an exceptional case, due to its non-combatant non-white personnel, paid at a lower rate, and its higher proportion of supporting services, also subject to lower pay. This, claimed Pretoria, prevented a possible capitation rate as settlement on the same terms as any agreement the UK reached with Australia and New Zealand.<sup>47</sup> The Union insisted that a decision should be reached in Pretoria and not London, and that the War Office (WO) should send an official to the Union authorised to make a settlement. When an official was dispatched, he soon requested to be returned home after meetings were cancelled with less than an hour's notice, and he became 'convinced the Union [was] trifling with [the] problem' and had no intention of reaching any agreement that would 'necessitate [a] supplementary budget'.<sup>48</sup> The Union's attitude was well-captured by one South African official who tersely commented that he was 'not moved ... by impulses of financial generosity in these inter-Governmental matters'.<sup>49</sup>

Although discussions first began in March 1941, it was fully two and a half years later, in late 1943, that a settlement was eventually reached. The Union still refused to pay the full cost of its forces. By this time, early Union claims that paying for its forces was 'far beyond the financial means of the country' had been exposed as false—indeed, in one such meeting where this claim was made, the British Chancellor confidently asserted that the Union was, in fact, 'a rich country'.<sup>50</sup> When challenged, Pretoria always fell back on the argument that the issues were actually domestic and political, an area in which London was simply unwilling to intervene. The UK, sensitive to the Union's position, agreed to a settlement that let Pretoria pay around, but probably under, 60 per cent of its air and ground force expenses.<sup>51</sup>

The importance of the domestic reaction to any agreement was obvious when these settlements were discussed in the South African parliament. In the first place, it was no coincidence that eventual settlement over payment for the Union's armed forces was not decided until after

Smuts was returned with an improved majority after the election of July 1943. Smuts, who continually tried to stay out of financial negotiations and leave them to his deputy Hofmeyr—perhaps because of the risks of being implicated in any negative deal—admitted that prior to July 1943, it was simply impossible to approach parliament with a request for large defence funds for overseas forces.<sup>52</sup> When challenged domestically on the agreement over paying for overseas forces at the end of the year, Smuts became agitated and responded that the ‘agreement was in every respect to South Africa’s advantage’, representing ‘good business’ for the Union. Other government representatives boasted that the Union had driven ‘a very hard bargain indeed’.<sup>53</sup> Smuts’ government met its needs of satisfying domestic opinion and undermining its opposition’s attacks.

The Union therefore provided no financial gifts to the UK and what action it took was firmly in the interests of its own country. The domestic repercussions of any financial arrangement were always a key consideration, particularly the public response and the opportunities this created for the political opposition. Such concerns were taken so far that the Union was willing to gain advantage from London’s predicament and weak position—no offer from the UK was ever accepted without being renegotiated in better terms for the Union. At times, the UK virtually subsidised Smuts’ political security through these arrangements, a move it was willing to take to keep South Africa in the war.<sup>54</sup>

Unsurprisingly, South Africa did well out of the war financially. The Union reduced external public debt by £82m, almost doubled its balances in London to £72m (foreign exchange balances grew by £58m) and steadily built its independent gold reserves to £205.8m, from just £44.4m in 1939.<sup>55</sup> At the same time it developed its harbours and industries, was able to pay for its overseas forces at a reduced rate and avoided any taxation or decline in the living standard of its population (more so the European population) similar to that which was seen elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

The composition of the Union’s economy did not lend itself to complementary agreements with the UK. The UK required gold, preferably provided as credit, an arrangement that offered South Africa no benefit. The Union consistently had the means to provide more for the UK and to lessen the cost of its forces on London, but privileged its domestic concerns over the risk of a negative public reaction to providing aid. Whatever the limitations on the gold received, however, the UK always acquired enough for its strategic needs. This was simply essential to meet

London's currency requirements throughout the different phases of the war; gold often proved much more valuable than any measurement based on its initial sterling value can determine.<sup>56</sup> Its greatest importance was in underwriting the strength of sterling, the continued confidence in which allowed the UK to acquire over £3bn of materials on sterling credit during the war.

## NOTES

1. H. M. Robertson, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: The War & the South African Economy', UWH 1.
2. In the case of dollars this was a strict policy, whereas gold was optional. See 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 23: Activities 1940-1943: External War Finance* (London, 1979), p. 246.
3. J.W. Garmany, 'Papers on Aspects of S.A. Economy Before the War', UWH 1.
4. In 1938, trade with the UK and Empire made up 53 per cent of imports and 56 per cent of exports. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
5. The UK took 74 per cent of the Union's agricultural exports in 1938. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
6. Garmany, 'Aspects of the S.A. Economy'.
7. R. Sayers, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Financial Policy, 1939-45* (London, 1956), pp. 306-7.
8. It was claimed that gold production was the most valuable contribution the Union offered to the Allied war effort. British High Commissioner, Pretoria, to DO, London, 11 September 1942, T 160/1359.
9. 'Dollar Position', 11 December 1939, T 160/981.
10. H. M. Robertson, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: The War & the South African Economy', UWH 1.
11. 'Note of a meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr Sturrock on 7 September 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
12. A.T.C. Slec, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
13. For more on this, see W.F. Kimball, *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941* (Baltimore, 1969), p. 149; Reynolds, *Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 159, 163; Sayers, *Financial Policy*, pp. 383-5.

14. This provoked shock around the Commonwealth. See, for instance, 'Report on Visit to Washington, March 17-21', unsigned, 21 March 1941, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3971.
15. Note on folder, 2 December 1942, DO 35/1028/2.
16. 'Note of a meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr. Sturrock on 7 September 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
17. 'Notes on Anglo-South African Finance', ND, DO 35/1028/2, pp. 63-7.
18. They were at £7m at the outbreak of war and reduced to £0.6m by February 1941. 'Financial Relations with the Union of South Africa', 31 August 1942, DO 35/1028/2.
19. Note on folder, 31 April 1943, DO 35/1028/2.
20. For instance, in 1940, the Union's gold output was 14 million ounces, of which 10 million were sold to the UK. J.W. Garmany, 'Consultations with U.K. Govt. on Economic Warfare', UWH 8.
21. A.T.C. Slee, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
22. 'Financial Relations with the Union of South Africa', 31 August 1942, DO 35/1028/2.
23. J.W. Garmany, 'Consultations with U.K. Govt. on Economic Warfare', UWH 8. Keynes was particularly reluctant for the UK to follow this path. 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, Moggridge, *External War Finance*, p. 250.
24. 'The Overseas Assets and Liabilities of the United Kingdom', ND, Moggridge, *External War Finance*, p. 281.
25. 'Overseas Financial Policy in Stage III', Note by Keynes, May 1945, D. Moggridge, (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 24: Activities 1944-1946: The Transition to Peace* (London, 1979), p. 268.
26. Slee, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
27. J.W. Garmany, 'S.A. War Economy, 1939-1945: Aspects of the S.A. War Economy, Vol. I', UWH 1.
28. 'Re Policy on Gold Mining', A. D. P. Heeney, 14 October 1942, RG-2-7-C, vol. XI.
29. For the effects on gold production in South Africa and other Commonwealth countries, see A.T.C. Slee, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6; and External Affairs: United States Lease-Lend Bill, delivery of gold mining requirements under Union, USA, UK Joint Supply Council, Treasury papers, vol. 63, FS1/88/4, Part I.

30. Secretary of State for External Affairs, Cape Town, to South African High Commissioner, London, 16 January 1942, Treasury papers, vol. 63, FS1/88/4, Part I.
31. 'Brief for the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his meeting with Mr. Sturrock on 7 Sept. 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
32. During the same year, by the most conservative estimation of the value of gold, the Union's reserves climbed from £44.4m to £77m. A.T.C. Slec, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
33. Note on meeting between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister (South Africa), T 160/1359.
34. Sayers, *Financial Policy*, pp. 306-7.
35. Letter from the British High Commissioner, Pretoria, to DO, London, 5 March 1943, T 160/1359.
36. A.T.C. Slec, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
37. 'Note of a meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr. Sturrock on 7 September 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
38. The High Commissioner warned London that the Union was 'not prepared ... to take any political or financial risks commensurate with the military risks they readily face'. 'Financial Relations with the Union of South Africa', 31 August 1942, DO 35/1028/2.
39. The capitation rate was a fee paid per head, per day, for the forces. It was reached by taking into account the composition of the units (fighting personnel, rearward services, etc.) and the expenditure each group incurred, then calculating an overall average per man.
40. 'Overseas Financial Policy in Stage III', note by Keynes, May 1945; and 'Statistics Bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition', Moggridge, *Transition to Peace*, pp. 91, 269.
41. This was the case until the Treasury got involved in the Anglo-Dominion arrangements at the end of the war. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
42. This quote is placed in the context of Anglo-South African wartime financial relations in 'Notes on Anglo-South African Finance', ND, DO 35/1028/2, pp.63-67.
43. Section III: Finance, *South African Year Book* (Pretoria, 1946), UWH 70.

44. W.K. Hancock, *Smuts, Vol. II: The Fields of Force 1919-1950* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 370.
45. 'Notes on Anglo-South African Finance', ND, DO 35/1028/2.
46. 'Brief for the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his meeting with Mr. Sturrock on 7 Sept. 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
47. Dominions Expeditionary Forces, DO 35/1220.
48. Military Mission, Pretoria, to War Office, London, 18 September 1942, DO 35/1028/2. By December officials in the DO were still complaining that the Union was continuing to 'leave us in the air on gold and military expenditure'.
49. This statement was written by Brigadier Williamson, the Union Treasury Controller and secretary to the Defence Finance Committee. 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Secondment of Union Personnel to U.K. Forces', E. Williamson, UWH 8.
50. 'Note of a meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Mr. Sturrock on 7 September 1942', DO 35/1028/2.
51. Dominions Expeditionary Forces, DO 35/1220; and E. Williamson, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Financial: War Settlements – S.A.-U.K. 1945', UWH 7.
52. Anglo-South African Defence Finance Negotiations: East African and Middle East Campaigns, A.T.C. Slee, 'S.A. War Economy 1939-1945: Aspects of Anglo-South African Wartime Financial Relations', UWH 6.
53. British High Commissioner, Pretoria, to DO, 17 March 1944, DO 35/1220.
54. Anglo-South African Defence Finance Negotiations: East African and Middle East Campaigns, UWH 6.
55. Section III: Finance, *South African Year Book* (Pretoria, 1946), UWH 70.
56. Apart from its main purpose of underwriting confidence in the sterling area, South African gold acquired by the UK was sold, for a period, to India and countries in the Middle East at a significant profit. For more on this, see Sayers, *Financial Policy*, pp. 280–4.

## The Pacific Dominions and Sterling

Unlike the other Dominions, Australia and New Zealand can be more usefully analysed together. Although there was economic variation between the two—for instance Australia's economy was more industrialised than New Zealand's—there were numerous similarities, particularly in their relationships with the UK. The two Dominions relied heavily on the export of a narrow range of agricultural products, for which the UK was the main market. They both required credit from the UK in the period 1939–41 to sustain their economies and war efforts. The Pacific Dominions relied on their sterling balances in London to negotiate international trade, which resulted in a serious commitment to, and concern for, the sterling area. Both showed genuine willingness to pay the costs incurred by their overseas forces, when they had the means to do so. Each hosted large numbers of American forces in their country, selling the dollars they earned back to the UK. And both Australia and New Zealand made disproportionately large contributions in reciprocal aid for the USA.

The Pacific Dominion economies were tied more intimately to the UK than those of Canada or South Africa. London led an investment boom in Oceania in the second half of the nineteenth century which, along with the sale of primary exports home to the mother country, set the tone of financial dependence. As the two countries transitioned from self-governing colonies to Dominions at the beginning of the twentieth century, London was investing as much money in the South Pacific region as it was across

the whole of Europe.<sup>1</sup> During the interwar period both Dominions naturally embraced policies of imperial economic integration—imperial preference, the sterling bloc and then the sterling area. They each relied more fully on the sterling area than South Africa did, because their trade earned sterling balances that were transformed to hard currencies in London to finance North American imports. South Africa, by contrast, could use gold directly as payment in hard currency countries without using London as a point of exchange.

The Pacific Dominions were consistently the most committed to schemes of imperial defence and cooperation in the interwar period: because they had the most homogeneous populations (mainly of British origin and descent), were the furthest from the main body of Royal Navy strength in the home waters, and felt a genuine regional threat existed in the form of Japan—a country rearming and engaging in expansionist policies. On the other hand, they were also the Dominions with the least financial resources to devote to the war effort. There was little doubt in the UK that the Pacific Dominions would fight the war—it just appeared to London that it was going to be a British responsibility to pay for much of this contribution. The UK therefore adopted a policy of discouraging such heavy financial dependence on London during the war, while ultimately accepting that it had a financial responsibility to underwrite the Pacific Dominions' willingness to fight. While the UK was willing to pay for military expenditure, it was reluctant to prop up the Dominions' economies and therefore would, as one Canadian observer wrote, 'move heaven and earth to prevent English gold being used to enable Australians to ride in new cars'.<sup>2</sup> This captured the ongoing underlying suspicion of British officials that the Pacific Dominions' economies were weak and overly reliant on the UK.

In the summer of 1939, New Zealand sent its Finance Minister Walter Nash to London to negotiate a loan from the British government, because New Zealand was unable to raise the necessary funds on the London or New York money markets. The request was dressed up in New Zealand's defence needs, but had its roots in the fact that the country was virtually bankrupt. The Labour government that came to power in 1935 earnestly pursued policies of spending on social welfare, housing and public works. These were expensive schemes, and when the price of agricultural exports plummeted in 1938, so too did New Zealand's income, which in turn caused a flight of credit. The Labour government had inherited sterling balances of £46m when it came to power but by the end of 1938 these were dwindling to a dangerously low level—just £5.5m.<sup>3</sup>



A default loomed in 1939 and, without financial aid, appeared to be a certainty when debt obligations matured in January 1940. New Zealand therefore needed sterling immediately to shore up its economy and pay for imports. In London, Nash asked for a defence loan—Wellington would spend £20m on imperial defence to the end of 1940, and the UK was asked to provide half this amount immediately in credit. In London, there was no doubt that the loan in the first instance would be used to meet the immediate currency deficiencies New Zealand was experiencing, not for defence. In meetings during the summer Nash could not deny that the loan would not necessarily be spent directly on defence in the first instance, but he was willing to assure the UK that £20m would ultimately go to defence schemes, an impossible sum for New Zealand to spend without immediate British finance. He emphasised the importance of meeting New Zealand's obligations, which were formulated alongside the UK and Australia at the Pacific Defence Conference of 1938, namely taking over the defence of Fiji and improving imperial air strength in the South Pacific. Nash further argued that the Dominions had never taken on their fair share of defence obligations and that, with the UK's loan, New Zealand could set an example for the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup>

The UK, however, feared a different example would be set: that agreed Dominion defence obligations would only be assumed if the UK agreed to meet capital expenditure demands. The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Sir Thomas Inskip, suggested that the Dominions would view the UK as 'a bottomless pocket' for rearmament.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the long-term implications of a New Zealand default, with war looming, compelled British action. London refused to meet New Zealand's request entirely and Nash had to answer searching questions in negotiations. The New Zealand leader was warned that the British taxpayer would not continue to fund New Zealand's social welfare policies, while the Minister for Coordination of Defence, Lord Chatfield, belittled Nash's claim that £10m spent on the defence of Fiji was a vital expenditure with a European war looming.<sup>6</sup> The UK did provide New Zealand with funds—a £5m loan and £4m of export credits – but there was a marked reluctance in the action.

When war began, requests were generally received more favourably. Wellington first suggested that the UK pay for New Zealand's overseas forces and that the bill be settled after the war.<sup>7</sup> Off the back of agreeing substantial, long-term and guaranteed purchases of primary products from New Zealand and with British financial burdens mounting globally, London was understandably unenthusiastic about this proposal.

Instead the UK proposed what became known as the Memorandum of Security: the UK would meet New Zealand's initial costs and Wellington would repay what it could on an ongoing basis, depending on how its economic situation developed. New Zealand accepted and the agreement functioned successfully for the rest of the war. New Zealand was consistent in making incremental payments back against the UK's initial outlay whenever its sterling balances permitted. The outstanding amount was paid off with little delay after the war, with the remaining negative balance met entirely in 1946.<sup>8</sup>

Australia was better off than New Zealand, but still not in a strong financial position. In June 1939 the country raised a defence loan in London, of £6m, to facilitate rearmament. The political willingness to commit to the war effort, through involvement in the BCATP, committing naval forces and raising an expeditionary force, was not matched by Australia's financial means.<sup>9</sup> The 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) alone was estimated to cost around £5m a year to support overseas, money that Australia could not immediately find.<sup>10</sup> The £6m defence loan helped stimulate rearmament and prepare initial forces, but Canberra was clear in negotiations with the UK in the opening months of the conflict that it could not fund its initial overseas war effort.

With low sterling balances, Australia requested a second loan—this time £12m—in December 1939 to meet its overseas expenses for the first year of war.<sup>11</sup> Memories of the Great Depression, during which Australia suffered a sterling balance crisis that forced the country to sell its small independent gold reserve and depreciate the Australian pound, convinced Canberra that further measures were needed to protect Australia's position. An agreement was reached with the British Treasury which compelled the UK to safeguard Australian sterling balances at a level of £40m (£50m<sup>12</sup>)—if Australia took on commitments which would bring the balance below that level, London would advance funds by way of a loan to prevent the fall. Conversely, Australia would meet its overseas war obligations if it had sufficient balances above £40m.

These loans perpetuated the typical perception in London that the UK was, as one official remarked, the 'Reliable Cow, expected to yield in all seasons' for the Pacific Dominions with their financial requests.<sup>13</sup> British officials were dismissive of the Pacific Dominions' ability to pay their way, generally adopting the attitude that it was a case of 'how much', not 'if', the UK would need to provide—an impression that Pacific Dominion representatives were now always quick to dispel early on in the war.<sup>14</sup>

For some, this attitude did not change.<sup>15</sup> As the war progressed, however, the financial contribution of the Pacific Dominions became increasingly important to the UK. The Pacific Dominions were not altruistic in their economic generosity, but the amount they provided within their means was in stark contrast to South Africa's intransigence and of a sufficiently different nature to Canadian financial support to be appreciated and considered crucial in its own right.<sup>16</sup>

Through the Memorandum of Security, Australia's defence loans and London's agreement to provide the Canadian dollar cost of Pacific Dominion participation in the BCATP, the UK met the initial costs of the overseas effort of the Pacific Dominions. These were, however, all forms of loan—loans that the Pacific Dominions pledged to pay back as soon as possible, even during the war. Increasingly from the middle of the war, improving sterling balances allowed Australia and New Zealand to not only meet their own current overseas costs, but to begin to pay back the initial outlay that London had shouldered. Furthermore, negotiations on the capitulation rates for ground forces in the Middle East did not bring the same ongoing debate as those with South Africa,<sup>17</sup> and London felt it could demand more from the Pacific Dominions than it could from Smuts' government in the Union, given the latter's political insecurity. The cost of Pacific Dominion forces for the UK was therefore only partial during the war, paid off entirely by 1946 and met at a rate the UK largely found acceptable.

In this way the Pacific Dominions were not, or at least only to a relatively small degree, a burden on London's resources. But with such low independent financial strength, what could they provide for the UK? Both Dominions wrote down sterling debt the UK owed to them in the post-war period, with a sterling crisis looming, in recognition of a shared war effort and mainly because of the necessity, as they saw it, of the UK recovering its financial strength.<sup>18</sup> During the war, however, their financial support was not in the form of an outright financial gift but rather in what they were willing to provide for (and receive from) the UK. The transformed strategic situation—namely Washington's declaration of war and, from 1942, the presence of American troops in the Pacific Dominions in large numbers—enabled Australia and New Zealand to provide direct and indirect support for London's financial position.

The direct support was through the dollars the Dominions were earning from the expenditure of the USA and its troops in the Dominions. This was a considerable source of dollar income, and unlike South Africa,

the Pacific Dominions showed no desire to hoard this as an independent reserve. The dollars were sold to London in exchange for sterling, improving the hard currency position of the entire sterling area. This highlighted the importance to the UK of the Dominions accepting sterling balances—dollars being earned in the South Pacific were automatically at London's disposal.<sup>19</sup> Australia showed the same willingness with the gold it produced, although this was on a very small scale compared to South Africa, with the amounts decreasing steadily from about £12m in 1939, until output generated was perhaps only £5m a year by 1945.<sup>20</sup>

If the UK's forward-purchasing of primary exports and defence loans were responsible for shoring up the Pacific Dominion economies in 1939–41, having dollars to sell for sterling by 1942 placed them on a truly stable basis. From this time the sterling balances of the two Dominions reached proportions that facilitated repayment of the earlier loans from the UK.<sup>21</sup> Australia, earning significantly more than its southern neighbour, even began to repatriate British-held debt near the end of the war. There was hardly room for complaint over this in London, given the extent to which Canada and, in particular, South Africa had taken this process in their respective Dominions. Australia's repatriation was limited in scale, taken to keep sterling balances in London at measured levels while improving Australia's future financial outlook.<sup>22</sup> For the UK, financial links were reduced but overall remained firmly intact; Australia's financial improvement suggested London would not be required to play such a matriarchal role in the post-war era.

The supply of dollars was beneficial to the UK in several ways. Hard currency revenue from the sterling area allowed the UK to improve its reserves position at a time when the USA was allowing London to do so. The extent of sterling area gold and dollar earnings was significant—in 1943, for instance, it generated US\$515m for London.<sup>23</sup> Australia and New Zealand's dollar earnings were offset well by the large overseas military commitments the two Dominions were paying for in full. This prevented vast sterling balances from being accrued in exchange for these dollars, a development that would further weigh down the British economy in the post-war period. The automatic willingness to sell dollars back to London, particularly in exchange for sterling, was in sharp contrast to South Africa and its gold.

Indirectly, the Pacific Dominions further aided the UK through the provision of reciprocal aid to the USA. Reciprocal aid played an important role in reducing Anglo-American tension and ensuring that Lend-Lease

continued on a bountiful scale. The USA rarely distinguished between the empire's constituent parts, and therefore any aid provided in the South Pacific helped in part to ensure that the UK continued to receive its own Lend-Lease requirements.<sup>24</sup>

Australia was already providing goods and services to the USA before the reciprocal aid deal was signed, and after its initiation continued to do so on a large scale. Australia received US\$1.4bn of Lend-Lease aid from the USA; it contributed US\$1.1bn in return through reciprocal aid. This was mainly through food and services provided for American troops based in Australia—in 1942–3, for instance, Australia provided 95 per cent of the food consumed by American troops within its territory. As a proportion of national income, Australia's reciprocal aid cost just as much as the entire Lend-Lease programme cost the USA; as a proportion of war expenditure, it was significantly larger than the American bill. Most important of all for the UK, Australia took only 3.3 per cent of the total Lend-Lease expenditure, but provided around 13 per cent of all imperial reciprocal aid.<sup>25</sup>

New Zealand also provided a disproportionately large quantity of reciprocal aid to the USA, although it was initially reluctant to sign on for the process. Despite receiving most of what it ordered through Lend-Lease, Wellington recognised that the needs of the USA's troops in the Pacific would be huge in relation to New Zealand's resources. This would potentially cause a direct financial loss for New Zealand, as well as depriving it of primary products used as currency-earning exports. Indeed New Zealand was last to sign a reciprocal aid bill and required assurances from the UK to underwrite any loss of income resulting from reciprocal aid provision before it initialled the agreement.<sup>26</sup>

In relation to its means, Wellington's contribution was also substantial. New Zealand fed over 500,000 troops in the South Pacific—a substantial achievement for a country with a population in 1939 of just 1.5m.<sup>27</sup> Its contribution through reciprocal aid was about a quarter of the value of the Lend-Lease it received in 1942, and half in 1943. During the final two years of the war, New Zealand impressively managed to break even in this regard. By measures of national income and war expenditure, its contribution was far above that of the USA's. Indeed the effort was recognised as so great on New Zealand's part that no serious discussions on any post-war settlement of a Lend-Lease repayment took place.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the UK's US\$6bn, the rest of the empire provided around US\$1.5bn of reciprocal aid. The two Pacific Dominions provided around 75 per cent of this non-UK figure.<sup>29</sup>

Australia and New Zealand were therefore little burden on the UK financially during the war. The British willingness to support the two economies in 1939–41 paid dividends when the Dominions became an important source of dollars, repaid British loans and took on disproportionate reciprocal aid provision in the second half of the war, which redounded to the UK's benefit. The perception that the UK was always the provider for the poor Pacific Dominions was slowly eroded during the conflict. Although neither Dominion ended the war with the same impressive economic outlook of Canada or South Africa, both recovered stability when compared to their delicate financial positions of 1939. The lack of financial gain spoke of the size of their wartime efforts in relation to their means and the absence of any obvious method to dramatically improve their financial outlook, such as South Africa's retention of gold. The actions of the Pacific Dominions were no more generous than Canada's—exchanging dollars for sterling was perceived to be in their interests, just as providing reciprocal aid was. As soon as it felt financially secure enough to do so, Australia repatriated debt just as Canada and South Africa had done. In contrast to South Africa, however, there remained a largely cooperative spirit in financial relations with the UK.

## NOTES

1. Davis & Huttenback, 'British finance', p. 39.
2. Towers to Ralston, 23 January 1940, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3992. For New Zealand, see 'Notes on a meeting between Mr Nash and Mr Inskip', DO, 23 June 1939, CAB 21/505.
3. G. Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield: New Zealand and its Allies, 1939–45* (North Shore, 2009), pp. 44–48.
4. 'DO Notes of a meeting with Mr Nash, 23 June 1939', CAB 21/505.
5. 'DO Notes of a meeting with Mr. Nash, 23 June 1939' and 'Record of a meeting between U.K. Ministers and Walter Nash, 26 June 1939', CAB 21/505.
6. 'Record of a meeting of British ministers at the Treasury, 27 June 1939', CAB 21/505.
7. Economic Aspects – Finance – General, EA1 712, 91/3/1, Part 1.
8. J.V.T. Baker, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: The New Zealand People at War: War Economy* (Wellington, 1965), pp. 270–2.

9. 'Meeting of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Dominions Secretary, Mr. Casey and Mr. Bruce, 24 November 1939', DO 35/1027/2.
10. Government of Australia, Canberra, to Australian High Commissioner, London, 14 December 1939, A2908, F39, PART 1.
11. British High Commissioner, Canberra, to DO, London, 14 December 1939, A670, 46/1939. See also Loans from UK Govt. to meet Australia's overseas war effort – Part 1, A2908, F39, PART 1.
12. A£ = Australian pounds. Government of Australia, Canberra, to Australian High Commissioner, London, 14 December 1939, A2908, F39 PART 1.
13. Note on 'Mr. Nash', 20 March 1944, T 160/1184.
14. 'Note of a meeting with Mr. Casey', 1 December 1939, DO 35/1027/2.
15. 'Overseas Financial Policy in Stage III', Note by Keynes, May 1945, D. Moggridge, (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 24: Activities 1944-1946: The Transition to Peace* (London, 1979), pp. 263–70.
16. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition' enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
17. Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield*, p. 137.
18. Baker, *War Economy*, pp. 526–7; S.J. Butlin & C.B. Schedvin, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Series 4 – Civil, Vol. III: Australia War Economy, 1942-1945* (Canberra, 1977), p. 603.
19. 'Our prospective Dollar Balances', note by Keynes, 10 September 1942, D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 23: Activities 1940-1943: External War Finance* (London, 1979), p. 246.
20. Loans from UK Govt. to meet Australia's overseas war effort – Part 1, A2908, F39, PART 2.
21. Australia's sterling balances in London were £65m by August 1943 and as high as £143m by September 1944. Sterling Balances, A2908, F39, PART 4.
22. Butlin & Schedvin, *War Economy, 1942-1945*, p. 598.
23. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition' enclosed with Keynes

- to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
24. 'Note on a Conversation at a Lunch on 24 September 1943 in Lord Keynes' room at the Statler Hotel', Moggridge, *External War Finance*, p. 287.
  25. Butlin & Schedvin, *War Economy, 1942-1945*, pp. 128-139.
  26. Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield*, p. 215.
  27. When New Zealand requested non-military aid from Canada under Mutual Aid (requests for which were generally refused), Wellington reminded Ottawa that the civilian contribution *was* much of New Zealand's effort. Sullivan to Howe, 4 November 1944, MG 27 III B 20, Vol. 2, folder 4. See also Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield*, p. 200.
  28. Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield*, pp. 249-250.
  29. R. Overy, 'World Trade and World Economy' in I.C.B. Dear & M.R.D. Foot (eds), *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford, 2001).



## CONCLUSION

The extent of the financial support each Dominion provided involved the balancing of the UK's wartime plight with economic considerations, political conditions and perceived domestic opinion. Canada provided the greatest financial support because it had the means and the requisite political stability for significant aid, and because, ultimately, it benefited the Canadian economy. At the other end of the spectrum, there was simply no economic rationale for South Africa to provide gold as credit. The South African government was continually courting its support base and trying to undermine the attacks of its political opposition. Indeed, the domestic political situation led Pretoria to avoid anything that hinted at imperial-minded generosity—the Union government tried to cultivate the perception that it was always striking 'hard bargains' in negotiations with the UK.

Even though South Africa was a reluctant contributor, its gold was nonetheless indispensable for two reasons. Firstly, the UK consistently required gold for exchange purposes and, perhaps more crucially, the global perception that the UK was receiving a steady stream of South African gold underwrote confidence in the sterling area throughout the war. This allowed the UK to finance a substantial portion of its purchases, otherwise impossible, on credit. South Africa's lack of generosity is apparent, relative to the other Dominions, but this does not make its contribution any less crucial. Indeed, the 'generosity' of the other Dominions was based on national gain, which happened to dovetail with the UK's interests.

In between these poles were the Pacific Dominions. Constrained by limited financial means, Australia and New Zealand at first continued their traditional reliance on the UK as a source of external finance for devel-

opment. After Pearl Harbor, the presence of American troops and their requirements for reciprocal aid allowed Australia and New Zealand to provide a meaningful economic contribution to the war. The direct threat of Japanese invasion from 1942 encouraged an all-out war effort, more similar to the UK's post-Dunkirk financial approach to the war than elsewhere, ensuring that where the means existed for the Pacific Dominions they were committed to Allied victory.<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War is often considered a high water mark in the UK's regimenting of its imperial resources, as centralised organisation emerged to a degree that hitherto only the most ardent imperialists could have hoped. Yet despite this imperial organisation, the story of Anglo-Dominion wartime financial aid stands apart from the colonial empire and follows more closely a Statute-of-Westminster narrative of cooperation through increasing partnership and emerging independence.<sup>2</sup> The UK's traditional matriarchal financial relationship with the Dominions held at the beginning of the war only briefly; indeed, the mother country was increasingly forced to lean on the Dominions as the conflict progressed.

When looking for favourable post-war financial arrangements, the UK stated that it 'had seldom charged the Dominions the full cost which we have incurred on their behalf for that part in the war effort which purports to be their own'.<sup>3</sup> This was, in certain specific cases, an honest statement. In this way the UK did continue its traditional role of providing the finance that drove the expansion of the Dominion military forces and munitions factories. The financial aid the UK received from the Dominions, however, was second only to Lend-Lease in its importance and reversed traditional ties. Whereas neutral and colonial financial cooperation tended to entail the accrual of large sterling indebtedness, the Dominions largely prevented significant adverse balances from developing, sparing the UK additional post-war financial strain. In large part the Dominions covered their military post-war expenses during the war. This was an important marker of independence and signalled the increasing development of a relationship of partnership rather than dependence.

## NOTES

1. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition', enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.
2. This was reiterated from the start of the war, including by Mr Towers, the Governor of the Bank of Canada. 'Visit of Ministers from the Dominions and of a Representative from India: Questions Relating to Canadian War Finance', Minutes of a meeting held at the Treasury, 1 December 1939, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3992.
3. 'Statistics bearing on the Dimensions of the United Kingdom's Problem of External Finance in the Transition', enclosed with Keynes to Clark, 7 August 1944, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 4369.

# ‘Only the Air Force Can Win It’: The British Commonwealth Air Training Schemes

## INTRODUCTION

The Second World War was true to its name, with the Allied and Axis forces engaged in a truly global struggle.<sup>1</sup> With warfare occurring on an unprecedented scale, air power too was exploited to new and terrifying degrees. Air power, in the twentieth-century sense,<sup>2</sup> was a relatively new form of combat; it first became a relevant factor for strategists during the Great War. Coming just 11 years after the first recorded flight, the use of aeroplanes to wage war was still extremely novel between 1914 and 1918. British cities were initially on the receiving end of Germany’s Zeppelin raids, but future technological advancements in aircraft and weaponry seemed to promise a new era of warfare in which air power would be decisive.<sup>3</sup> Progression in technology was steady in the interwar period, although the balance of air strength among the European powers changed radically during this time. In 1918 the UK had the world’s largest air force, the Royal Air Force (RAF).<sup>4</sup> The British policy of disarmament, as well as the prohibitive costs of maintaining huge military forces with diminished financial resources in the interwar period, however, meant that for the time being, the RAF took on a role that largely centred on imperial policing, like the UK’s other armed services.

Conversely, the announcement of a German air force, the Luftwaffe, in March 1935, bolstering Hitler’s claims of air parity with the UK, signalled the beginning of a major shift of balance in air power to the European mainland. British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was troubled by nightmares of an indefensible London reduced to rubble as early as 1932, and

the news of the Luftwaffe's deadly contribution over Iberian skies in the Spanish Civil War did not bode well for British security in the future. Air travel was proliferating and capturing the British Empire's imagination,<sup>5</sup> while Baldwin's successor Neville Chamberlain provided an iconic—and darkly ironic—moment in 1938 when he stepped from the very machine that provided the greatest threat to the UK's island sanctuary to celebrate 'peace for our time'.<sup>6</sup> If 'the bomber could always get through' as politicians feared, the UK would no longer be safe behind its traditional Royal Navy shield; another major war would necessarily take on a very different complexion from the horrors that occurred in the trenches on the European mainland during the Great War.<sup>7</sup> As peace became increasingly tenuous and the UK faced the possibility of its own territory being seriously menaced by the renewed German threat, Whitehall looked to the Dominions to provide relief in an arms race in which the enemy already had a significant head start.

The Commonwealth contribution was essential to what the UK hoped to achieve. Men poured out of the Dominions to bolster British air strength all over the world. The sheer diversity in geographical range of operational theatres that the British air forces participated in during the war, from the South Pacific to West Africa, and north-west Europe to the Middle East, was phenomenal. The RAF had 487 squadrons by 1945, and the Dominions provided 100 of them.<sup>8</sup> Yet this impressive statistic neither tells the full story of Dominion involvement nor fairly reflects the importance of the Commonwealth role in the air war. The operational extent of the Dominions' efforts, while significant, had to negotiate both the Dominions' insistence on the concentration of national forces and their reliance on the UK for aircraft, technical support and ground personnel. Nevertheless it was sprinkled with supreme successes, from the individual—such as South Africa's Adolph 'Sailor' Malan, who by the end of 1940 was deemed the most successful fighter pilot in the war to date for single-handedly taking down a confirmed 35 enemy aircraft<sup>9</sup>—to the collective, as highlighted by the effort of Canada's 6th Bomber Group, which operated with acclaim in the most deadly field for the airman, the skies of the Reich.<sup>10</sup>

Two factors, however, were a necessary prerequisite for the diminished interwar RAF to become a major war-altering force between 1939 and 1945: the first was the production of an adequate number of sufficiently advanced machines to cope with the strength of the Luftwaffe; the second was to find and train the necessary aircrews to utilise the potential of this vast mechanised force.<sup>11</sup> For the former, the UK itself, increasingly alongside North

American production as the war progressed, was the centre of the effort. In the latter category, it was the Dominions that ensured the UK could meet its global commitments and transform the RAF from its desperate defence during the Battle of Britain into an aggressive weapon capable of influencing a multitude of theatres and inflicting widespread damage on Germany.<sup>12</sup> A tremendous and well-trained air force was fundamental to British efforts: for protecting British territory and supply lines; for striking a blow on enemy soil before Allied armies could return to the European mainland; for paving the way for a successful Allied landing force; and for gradually draining German resolve on the home front and supporting British offensives wherever they took place. In facilitating this, the Commonwealth's air effort was indispensable to the UK and has been aptly described as 'the most striking, if not the greatest concerted effort which the nations of the British Commonwealth have ever made'.<sup>13</sup>

In this section, I first detail British air strategy in the Second World War. This demonstrates how the Dominion contribution fitted into London's strategy, thereby contextualising the importance of this involvement. Next, I describe the inauspicious air power the Dominions possessed in 1939, and establish why, upon the outbreak of war, the Dominions emphasised air training, which they could develop even with limited resources. In the following chapter, I chart the negotiations over the major air training scheme, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), highlighting the point that, despite its eventual success, the participating parties—the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—had individual interests to promote when devising the scheme, divergent concerns that briefly threatened the cooperative aspects of the project. After mapping the whole global network of British air training, I focus on the BCATP and the statistics that show its success in producing aircrews, before analysing in Chap. 9 the complications involved in employing these aircrews, namely the issue of national identity for Dominion personnel serving with the RAF. Finally, in Chap. 10, I complete this section by considering the anomalous position of South Africa, outside the main Commonwealth scheme but training RAF aircrews nonetheless.

## NOTES

1. Part II is derived, in part, from an article published in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* on 18 December 2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03086534.2014.982416>.
2. For a brief but detailed review of the development of air power up to the Great War see S.F. Wise, *Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Volume I: Canadian Airmen and the First World War* (Toronto, 1980), pp. 3–10.
3. R. Titmuss, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950), pp. 3–4.
4. Air Ministry, *Second World War, 1939–1945: RAF Flying Training, Policy and Planning* (London, 1952), AIR 10/551, p. 2.
5. The 1920s saw the first flight from the UK to Australia take place. Developments in Africa, such as the Cairo to Cape route, were also significant in arousing public interest during this period. J.A. Brown, *South African Forces in World War II, A Gathering of Eagles: The Campaigns of the South African Air Force in Italian East Africa: June 1940–November 1941: With an Introduction 1912–1939* (Cape Town, 1970), p. 7.
6. Chamberlain delivered the 'Peace for our time' phrase on 30 September 1938, having returned from Germany with Hitler's signature on the Munich Agreement.
7. See Stanley Baldwin's November 1932 speech, 'A Fear for the Future'; and, 30 July 1934, *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)* (House of Commons), vol. 292, c. 2336.
8. A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006), pp. 38–9.
9. A. Gavshon, *Flight for Freedom: The Story of the S.A.A.F. and its Aces* (Johannesburg, 1941), p. 103; Opening speech by the South African representative, AIR 2/8181.
10. W. Carter, *Anglo-Canadian Wartime Relations, 1939–1945: RAF Bomber Command and No. 6 (Canadian) Group* (New York, 1991); S. Dunmore and W. Carter, *Reap the Whirlwind: The Untold Story of 6 Group, Canada's Bomber Force of World War Two* (Toronto, 1991); B. Greenhouse et al., *The Official History of the Canadian Royal Air Force, Volume III: The Crucible of War, 1939–1945* (Toronto, 1994).
11. Air Ministry, *RAF Flying Training*, AIR 10/551, p. 1.

12. For the impact on Germany, see T. Childers, 'Facilis descensus overriest: The Allied bombing of Germany and the Issue of German Suffering', *Central European History*, 38, 1 (2005), 75–105; M. Nolan, 'Germans as Victims During the Second World War: Air Wars, Memory Wars', *Central European History*, 38, 1 (2005), 7–40.
13. Caines to Stephenson, 2 June 1945, DO 35/1204.



## British Air Strategy and the Dominions

After the years of reflection and disarmament following the Great War, the UK was spurred into rearmament through a realpolitik acknowledgement of the potentially threatening policies that the nationalist governments of the future Axis powers were pursuing. A decision was reached in 1934 to rearm the UK, starting with the RAF and reaching the other forces in 1935; the Dominions were encouraged to follow British plans in this direction.<sup>1</sup>

For air strategy, rearmament primarily meant building up a bomber deterrent. Baldwin was reflecting popular beliefs when he claimed that the bomber was unstoppable; the best defensive option in the mid-1930s was perceived to be the possession of the capability to return an equal or greater payload of bombs to an enemy aggressor. The operational capabilities of fighters and anti-aircraft weapons at this time seemed to reinforce such thinking: fighters had very similar qualities to bombers and were only beginning to differ in performance capability, thus offering little advantage over producing bombers; additionally, existing technology and inexperience precluded the option of a radar-based defence network like that which ultimately provided British salvation in the Battle of Britain in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

For several reasons, the centrality of the theory of strategic bombing never changed for the UK over the course of the war. Central to this was the independent existence of the RAF, separate from the British Army and

Royal Navy. Largely brought into being on the premise that the delivery of bombs to foreign territories from the air could have a decisive impact on the outcome of future wars,<sup>3</sup> the RAF faced down challenges to its continued independence in the interwar period by emphasising this perceived potential of strategic bombing. Within the myriad of cooperative roles that the RAF fulfilled when war broke out, the strategic bombing capability more than anything else defined the individual nature of the RAF's existence.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in the late 1930s, other imperatives dictated the rearmament process. In a 1937 report on rearmament, the Minister for Coordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip—heavily influenced by the former Chancellor and then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain—emphasised the importance of maintaining the long-term financial health of the UK's economy, as part of the traditional British long-war strategy. Indeed, this was the only strategy believed to facilitate British victory in another major war. For London, another world war would be a marathon of attrition, not a Blitzkrieg sprint. Financial considerations were important to air power because the RAF became the most expensive armed service, superseding the Royal Navy, and taking 36 per cent of defence expenditure in 1938, 41 per cent by 1939.<sup>5</sup> With Berlin appearing to win the bomber race and British finances under strain, the UK had to find a way to push back; meanwhile, a growing awareness of the diverging capabilities of fighter aircraft against bombers in the final years of peace convinced the British government to privilege a cheaper policy of developing shadow production factories and increasing the production of fighters in relation to bombers.<sup>6</sup>

Whether determined by financial stringency or strategic principles, the policy bore fruit in the most spectacular fashion when the UK defied the succession of early Nazi successes to survive the Battle of Britain. Yet, despite increasingly promoting fighter production, the UK maintained its belief in the effectiveness of the bomber, from the time of Inskip's report through to the early years of the war. The ratio of bomber to fighter production from 1936 to 1939 was 2.3:1, and even with the desperate defensive crises of 1940 and the increasing capabilities of fighters, the ratio after 1939 remained 1.3:1.<sup>7</sup> When France fell and the UK's back was firmly to the wall, the UK's decision to fight on was partly based on the argument that a naval blockade and strategic bombing could still prove decisive against what London perceived as Germany's strained war economy.<sup>8</sup>

From the winter of 1940–1, the RAF's main focus, indeed the central element of London's whole offensive strategy, was strategic bombing. Having survived the risk of invasion, the UK was nevertheless still reeling from defeats on the European mainland and restricted to fighting defensive battles to preserve colonial territories and vital sea lanes. In this context the ability to strike a blow, any blow, at Germany was critical. Even after Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, handing the UK its first major ally in Soviet Russia in the summer of 1941, the importance of strategic bombing remained crucial—the UK could do little else to support its new ally and Stalin encouraged the bombing campaign enthusiastically.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed the bombing offensive was a political tool as much as a strategic necessity. It displayed to the USA that Britain was willing and able to take the war to Germany; it showed the Soviet Union that it was not fighting alone and unaided; and it provided encouragement to the occupied countries of Western Europe as they saw British bombers heading towards German cities. The actual impact of bombing in the early war years was much less apparent. Key lessons on how to return safely from bomber raids—that losses were minimised through night attacks and by flying high enough to remain beyond the range of anti-aircraft guns—were also the reasons why actually hitting a designated target was an extremely rare occurrence.<sup>10</sup> More than anything else, the war made it very apparent that pre-war theories of the decisiveness of a bombing offensive were seriously flawed, at least with existing methods and technology. Faced with a decision of moving to area bombing—effectively meaning leveling cities, which were much easier targets due to their size—or abandoning its only existing offensive option, the British government chose the former.<sup>11</sup> Questions of morality over what the new Air Chief Arthur Harris described as 'de-housing' (largely used as a euphemism for killing) of German civilians proved difficult, but the moral issue was largely settled for the British government on the basis of Germany's invasion of the neutral Low Countries in 1940 and Hitler's ruthless terrorising of Rotterdam through Luftwaffe bombing in the process.<sup>12</sup>

The promotion of Harris and Churchill's personal backing of the new Air Chief provided a fresh impetus and direction on bombing raids, which were subsequently pursued energetically and with increasing effectiveness from 1942 until the end of the war. These efforts dramatically multiplied in 1943 and again in 1944, playing an increasing role in the erosion of German strength.<sup>13</sup> With Harris determined to demonstrate British air power through bold plans such as highly destructive 1,000-aircraft

bombing raids, and the RAF's responsibility for a multitude of additional support roles for the army and navy, London's air policy required a steady and increasing flow of aircrew to the frontline. For this the Dominion contribution was of fundamental importance.

The interwar period did not suggest that the Dominions were in the process of preparing for a war-winning contribution in the air. The Dominion air forces between the wars were all fledgling establishments striving to institute and maintain a status independent of their sister armed services. Since air forces depended so heavily on industrial production, substantial financial resources and continued technical innovation, the Dominions were tightly bound to the UK, because the RAF provided leadership in all of these areas.

Once established, the Dominion air forces saw only minor developments in the interwar years, and the UK remained the primary stimulus for them—first through the 'Imperial Gift' of 1920. The RAF possessed a vast quantity of already outdated models of aircraft following the conclusion of the Great War and the UK decided to offer around 100 aircraft to each Dominion to stimulate the adoption of air power at the periphery of the empire.<sup>14</sup> Only New Zealand was slow to accept the offer, and because of this delay, Wellington was forced to accept the aircraft the other Dominions had rejected.<sup>15</sup> This Imperial Gift largely sustained the Dominion air forces throughout the 1920s. The Dominions made little progress in producing military aircraft domestically, expanding air force organisations or increasing the resources devoted to air defence. Where effort was sustained, it was usually in discussing civilian uses for aircraft; where money was released, it most often went to purchasing land on the premise of future development.

These actions reflected the difficulties that Dominion governments faced in developing air power independently of the UK. Air forces were an expensive business and as Table 7.1 demonstrates, the Dominions were simply not willing to devote the same proportion of national income to defence as the UK, even when rearmament started. Indeed, even if they had been, the actual sterling value of that percentage would have been considerably less than what the UK was appropriating for its armed forces.

Only the leading world powers were able to keep pace in the technological air race as aircraft became increasingly advanced. This provided further motivation for Dominion dependence on the UK, because technological advancement often went hand in hand with a willingness to invest financial resources. When a Dominion bucked this trend, for instance when Australia

**Table 7.1** Defence expenditure of the Commonwealth, 1937–8

	<i>Defence budgets 1937–8 (£m)</i>	<i>Defence expenditure as a percentage of national income</i>
United Kingdom	265.2	5.6
Canada	7.2	1.0
Australia	6.0	1.0
New Zealand	1.6	0.8
South Africa	1.7	0.4

*Source:* Peden (1987), p. 416

built an American model of training aircraft in 1936, rather than adopting British models, the British Air Ministry considered it a negative portent.<sup>16</sup>

Even if a smaller power could provide technological innovation, the existence of an aircraft industry was a necessary prerequisite to translate this into meaningful military power. Again the Dominions lacked sufficient aircraft industries, and they therefore remained tied to the metropole through their dependence on the UK's aircraft production. Canada, the most industrially advanced Dominion, had the greatest aircraft output. Yet, as with the Imperial Gift, Ottawa relied on British stimuli—mainly orders for aircraft to expand the RAF—for the capital investment necessary to initiate substantial schemes of production.<sup>17</sup>

Australia's aircraft industry was also relatively small. Its first incarnation collapsed under the financial pressure of the Great Depression, but a new enterprise was subsequently established, bolstered by fears that British manufacturing would only be capable of meeting the needs of the UK and its continental allies in a future conflict. As in Canada, the UK supported the Australian industry with an order for bombers before war broke out, in part because London perceived a growing American influence on what was a jealously guarded British market.<sup>18</sup>

New Zealand had a tiny productive capacity, but for an isolated country of 1.5 million people, its mere existence demonstrated Wellington's continued commitment to imperial defence. South Africa lagged behind the other Dominions, lacking the means to produce aircraft.<sup>19</sup> Creative solutions at the beginning of the war helped disguise the problems that this created; however, the delays in getting the Joint Air Training Scheme (JATS) in South Africa running at a reasonable pace before 1942 would be the price the Union paid for its lack of productive capacity.<sup>20</sup>

Although London provided orders to promote small-scale Dominion ventures, the UK was also partly responsible for the limited nature of these productive efforts. London persistently feared that decentralising the production of military equipment would loosen the bonds of imperial unity that, by the late 1930s, existed more deeply between Commonwealth military establishments than in many other areas.<sup>21</sup> British manufacturers were also loath to give up markets that they dominated in a world where the British proportion of manufactured world goods was in steady decline. The harsh realities of the rearmament race nevertheless helped sway London towards encouraging aircraft industry growth outside the British Isles. Table 7.2, however, shows that this belated effort achieved only limited success.

The Dominions did not surpass 10 per cent of total Commonwealth output until 1941 and, from 1942, roughly maintained the level of 15 per cent. The three-year delay to reach the 15 per cent level, and the fact that this was a rough cap on the proportion of Dominion output, demonstrate that pre-war initiatives were slight and significant growth was not actually achieved until wartime conditions necessitated it. The extent of decentralisation, meanwhile, was clearly not great enough to transform the Dominions into a major source of aircraft production during the war, at least in comparison with the UK itself.

What was important, however, was that this capacity for production existed. While its limited nature, particularly considering that in 1939 only 250 aircraft were produced in the Dominions, precluded a bold air policy *independent* of the UK, the capacity that did exist facilitated certain forms of contribution *alongside* the senior partner of the alliance. This transpired through the air training schemes, because the Dominions could provide a reasonable productive contribution to developing and expanding the training programmes, by building trainer aircraft instead

**Table 7.2** Aircraft production of the UK and the Dominions, 1939–45

	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
UK	7,940	15,049	20,094	23,672	26,263	26,461	12,070
Dominions	250	1,100	2,600	4,575	4,700	4,575	2,075
Dominion percentage	3.1	6.8	11.5	16.2	15.2	14.7	14.7

*Source:* Overly (1980), p. 150

**Table 7.3** Strength of the UK and Dominion air forces, by personnel numbers, 3 September 1939

	<i>RAF</i>	<i>RCAF</i>	<i>RAAF</i>	<i>RNZAF</i>	<i>SAAF</i>
Number of personnel	173,958	4,153	3,489	1,160	1,837

*Source:* Brown (1970), p. 23; Douglas (1986), p. 343; Gillison (1962), p. 58; Ross (1955), p. 34; Saunders (1975), p. 372

of producing combat aircraft; where this capacity was lacking, in South Africa, the training scheme experienced stunted growth in the early phase of the war and did not produce significant results until the UK's training aircraft resources were less seriously constrained from 1942.

The factors described in the preceding paragraphs therefore combined to ensure that, on the outbreak of war, the Dominion air forces were limited in size (Table 7.3).

The RAF numbered almost 175,000 personnel in September 1939; the Dominion air forces combined totalled just 10,639, or around 6 per cent of the Commonwealth total.<sup>22</sup> The Dominions therefore lacked the productive and manpower resources for an independent policy; cooperation with the RAF was a prerequisite for substantial Dominion participation in the air war. The UK was thus in a position of great influence over the direction of the Dominion air contribution in the war.

For London, this situation was double-edged. The UK was certain of the Dominion air forces' close ties to the RAF, yet their lack of strength and capacity for independent action meant that they were of dubious military value at the outbreak of war. The Dominion air forces in September 1939 were no more than small bodies of committed aircrew providing the potential foundations for much greater expansion. Even where they could spare airmen for Europe, the modern machines would mostly need to be provided by the UK. What was necessary was to devise a method of incorporating the basic Dominion air forces and small productive capacities into the RAF's ambitious strategy of pursuing strategic bombing on a decisive scale.

## NOTES

1. 'Committee of Imperial Defence: Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report', 28 Feb. 1934, CAB 16/110. On the 'Empire Tour', see S. Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets, Vol. III 1931-1963* (London, 1974), pp. 121-148.

2. R. Overy, *The Air War, 1939-1945* (London, 1980), pp. 5, 15.
3. C.D. Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother: The Royal Australian Air Force, 1921-1939* (Sydney, 1991), p. 58.
4. C.K. Webster and N. Frankland, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945* (London, 1961), p. 4.
5. Overy, *Air War*, p. 19.
6. 'Defence Expenditure in Future Years', 15 December 1937, CAB 24/273/41.
7. Overy, *Air War*, p. 20. See also J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy, Vol. II, September 1939 – June 1941* (London, 1957), pp. 211–13, 344, 549–550.
8. D. Reynolds, 'Churchill and the British "Decision" to Fight on in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons' in D. Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the International History of the 1940s* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 85, 97.
9. G.L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 418.
10. Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 418; G.C. Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 169.
11. Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 419.
12. Weinberg, *World at Arms*, p. 125. RAF bombing of Germany in any form, however, had been accepted long before. See H.W. Koch, 'The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany: The Early Phase, May – September 1940', *The Historical Journal*, 34, 1 (1991), 117–41. Overy notes the lack of impact discussions of the morality of area bombing had at the official level, Overy, *Air War*, p. 116. For a wider perspective on the effects of the morality issue on the government and beyond, see M. Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London, 2010), Chapter 19, RAF Bomber Command.
13. D. Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London, 2011), p. 287.
14. J. Bennett, *The Imperial Gift: British Aeroplanes which formed the RAAF in 1921* (Queensland, 1996).
15. J.M.S. Ross, *Royal New Zealand Air Force* (Wellington, 1955), p. 9.
16. Peden, 'Burden of Imperial Defence', p. 420.
17. Peden, 'Burden of Imperial Defence', pp. 419–420.



18. Peden, 'Burden of Imperial Defence', pp. 419–420. See also A. Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume II: The Royal Australian Air Force* (Melbourne, 2001), p. 55; D. Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939-45: Series III, Air, Vol. I, Royal Australian Air Force, 1939-1942* (Canberra, 1962), p. 49.
19. The Union government purchased Junkers aircraft for civilian use partly because they could be relatively easily converted within the Union for military operations. Memorandum by Air Commodore Croil, 5 September, 1936, RG24, vol. 3214.
20. Air Ministry, *Second World War, 1939-1945: RAF Flying Training, Policy and Planning* (London, 1952), AIR 10/551, p. 143; J.A. Brown, *South African Forces in World War II, A Gathering of Eagles: The Campaigns of the South African Air Force in Italian East Africa: June 1940-November 1941: With an Introduction 1912-1939* (Cape Town, 1970), p. 18.
21. R.F. Holland, *Britain and the Commonwealth Alliance, 1918-1939* (London, 1981), pp. 35, 191, 194.
22. Some Dominion men were already serving directly under the RAF including over 500 New Zealanders and almost 450 Canadians. E.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1983), p.5; W.D. McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War: Defence Policy, 1919-1939* (Christchurch, 1988), pp. 245–6. For South Africa, see Ross to Sturrock, 9 June 1941, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part 1.

## The Dominions Incorporated

The answer to this dilemma was a vast air training scheme that was to provide a steady output of trained aircrew to facilitate rapid RAF expansion. For Canada, Australia and New Zealand, this was the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP).<sup>1</sup> Although the proposed scheme accommodated significant air training in the Dominions to facilitate both the growth of Dominion air forces and the training of Britons for the RAF around the Commonwealth, the proposal also took into account the disparity of resources in the Commonwealth. The Dominions had potential aircrew numbers far beyond what they could sustain in combat operations, because, as we have seen, they lacked the means to support large operational air forces. The majority of Dominion aircrews, which incorporated those trained over and above domestic needs, thus crucially served under British operational control, within the RAF.

Air training took place in Canada for the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) during the Great War; Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King discussed a peacetime initiative for RAF training in Canada as early as 1926, but there was little urgency at the time in London or Ottawa to pursue the idea.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion lay dormant for a decade, and the UK did not push for the realisation of the idea until the late 1930s. By this time, however, King's terms had hardened beyond what the Air Ministry could accept. Pressures in Canadian domestic politics, including Canada's officially established independence, French-Canadian anti-war sentiment

and the growth of national feeling, competed with pro-imperial sentiment as war approached.<sup>3</sup> Air training initiatives with the other Dominions were also limited prior to 1939.

Upon the outbreak of war, a new urgency was instilled in the UK. The situation was critical—the UK was aware of the Luftwaffe's part in the rapid subjugation of Poland, and London recognised the limitations of the British Isles for a large air training network. The latter was a particular problem due to the UK's limited space, congested conurbations and vulnerability to enemy attack. Despite the failure of pre-war initiatives, Canada remained the favoured location for a large training network: for proximity to the UK, for industrial potential and for the resources of its neighbour, the USA.

The initial plan conceived by the Air Staff was expanded in discussions between the Australian and Canadian High Commissioners in London—Stanley Bruce and Vincent Massey—who envisioned Canada becoming the hub of all advanced air training for the UK and the Dominions.<sup>4</sup> This proposal met with general approval in London, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain laid the plan before his Dominion counterparts in a telegram on 26 September 1939.<sup>5</sup>

Pre-war refusals from Ottawa to become involved in schemes of imperial defence cautioned London on the nature of its request to Canada. Dominions Secretary Anthony Eden therefore suggested that Chamberlain appeal directly to Canadian Prime Minister King's ego, and the proposal was thus split into two parts—'To Canada only' and 'To all'.<sup>6</sup> In the former section, which Chamberlain described as 'a special personal appeal', he acknowledged that the scheme invited 'the co-operation of Canada to a very special degree'. Requesting King's urgent attention, Chamberlain evoked memories of the acclaimed Canadian air contribution in the Great War, stating, 'I feel that so far-reaching a project will strike your imagination particularly as it concerns an all-important field of war activity in which Canada has already made so striking and gallant an individual contribution.'<sup>7</sup>

The message 'To all' painted a gloomy picture of British prospects as current arrangements for air training stood. The War Cabinet concluded that it was 'now abundantly clear that an overwhelming air force will be needed in order to counter German air strength and ... bring ultimate victory'. The Dominions were left in no doubt about the size of expansion required and the potential casualties involved in maintaining a substantial air force—the British government was proposing that 50,000 aircrew

would need to be produced annually to cope with the strategic objectives of the RAF. The conclusion of the telegram suggested that half of the training network would be placed in the Dominions, so that air training would become 'a problem in the solution of which the overseas parts of the Empire may well be able to play a decisive part'.

The tone of the telegram varied from ambitious hope, for instance that the scheme would be of 'inestimable value to the common cause' and that it could 'prove decisive', to blatant hyperbole, with the claim that the effect of its mere initiation could 'have a psychological effect on the Germans equal to that produced by the intervention of the United States in the last war'. Nevertheless, the sense of grandeur and importance of the scheme to British strategy was never lost among the finer details.<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent negotiating process revealed much about the imperial dynamic that existed in the Commonwealth at the outbreak of war. Even though Bruce and Massey had moulded the initial air training scheme proposal together in London, the suggestion was disseminated by the UK, while Ottawa and Canberra did not communicate. This was typical of the lack of inter-Dominion communication outside London; the situation was exacerbated by King's personal preference of privileging the Anglo-Canadian (and Anglo-American) relationship at the expense of other imperial relations, including those with fellow Dominions.<sup>9</sup> While Canada gained a distinctively strong hand in imperial negotiations as the war progressed, thanks to the fundamental importance of its training effort, when it came to debating national identity issues, Canada made use of this unique leverage in Anglo-Canadian discussions, sometimes at the expense of Australia and New Zealand. With few exceptions, Dominion interaction was conducted through the Whitehall conduit, so that London very much remained the centre of Commonwealth relations.<sup>10</sup> This chapter looks first at the easier, although not uncomplicated, attitudes of Australia and New Zealand, before charting the larger Anglo-Canadian difficulties in negotiating the BCATP.

Each Dominion signalled its support in principle for the proposals and agreed to discussions being held in Ottawa. Negotiations began on 16 October 1939, with the British team led by the experienced industrialist Lord Riverdale, who arrived with the straightforward but technically vague brief of securing 'the agreement of the Dominion Governments concerned as speedily as possible to the establishment of the proposed Dominion Air Training Scheme for pilots and air crews'.<sup>11</sup>

Despite eventual success, the negotiations were often tense—particularly between the British and Canadian delegations.<sup>12</sup> Riverdale was by no means exaggerating when he described the process as ‘protracted and difficult’. Riverdale considered the other Dominion delegations very favourably in comparison to Canada, noting their ‘keen desire to make the maximum contribution possible to the cost and the success of the scheme’.<sup>13</sup> For the British High Commissioner in Ottawa, who experienced several damaging encounters with King while the discussions were on-going, the distinction was equally clear.<sup>14</sup> The delegations from the Pacific Dominions ‘never, even in the most difficult of moments of negotiation, forgot that they were here to forge a weapon for use against a common enemy’. Conversely, the Canadians, he claimed, ‘saw everything in terms of the advantage which might be secured for Canada and for themselves’.<sup>15</sup>

One reason why the UK experienced an easier negotiating process with the Pacific Dominions was that the actual issues of debate for Australia and New Zealand were small. They were, firstly, the cost, due to the shortage of available dollars to pay for sending personnel to Canada and covering the training expenses while in North America; and secondly, manpower, given the hastily assembled numbers that the British delegation initially proposed, which were not proportional to the populations of the three Dominions concerned.<sup>16</sup>

These problems were resolved with little difficulty. Since training was substantially cheaper for Australia and New Zealand at home, because they could pay for it in sterling and not dollars, it was agreed that some advanced training could be conducted in the South Pacific, not just the elementary instruction that was first proposed. This reduced the dollar burden: more pupils trained domestically meant less resources being diverted to North America. The resulting reduction in the proposed dollar expenditure was even more satisfactory for the British negotiators, because the negotiating Dominions insisted upon the British Treasury underwriting the Pacific Dominions’ dollar contribution. New Zealand, with the smallest population, also had its request for providing a smaller proportion of the pupils sympathetically heard and accepted.<sup>17</sup>

New Zealand had its own reasons beyond dollars for wanting a larger portion of training to occur domestically. As the only Dominion to have established a wartime air training plan with the UK before the conflict started, Wellington now wanted these facilities utilised and even expanded if possible, despite allowing the majority of New Zealand training to be

subsumed into the larger imperial network. Although the relative positions of Canada and Australia were taken into account and Wellington was concerned with the balance of finances and residual benefits,<sup>18</sup> Wellington's attitude in these reports was similar to that which prevailed during New Zealand's part in the initial negotiations: if New Zealand was losing out, it was only marginally and thus acceptable given the war emergency. And despite Canada's uncompromising mood in Ottawa in 1939, Wellington did not begrudge Canada when financial negotiations resumed in 1943, because Canada treated New Zealand with 'the utmost fairness and leniency' over finances while the scheme was in operation.<sup>19</sup>

It was Canberra that was much less disposed to the BCATP proposition than its delegation's largely compliant front in Ottawa suggested. Direct contact and relations between Australia and its North American 'Sister Dominion' before this time were described as 'distant',<sup>20</sup> and the initial response to the arrival of the Australian delegation in Ottawa at the beginning of November did little to inspire confidence. King saw the Pacific Dominions as a potential hindrance to be dealt with only after each Dominion had first negotiated individually with the UK, rather than explicitly as guests of Canada for four-party negotiations. This created a feeling of bitterness towards Canada among the negotiating teams that had travelled from the South Pacific, while also drawing all of the visiting delegations closer together.<sup>21</sup>

That negotiations with Australia went so smoothly for the UK was largely down to the leader of the Australian delegation, James Fairbairn. Australia's negotiating stance was ultimately circumscribed by the limitations of its capacity to conduct air training at home, but the team was able to negotiate confidently given Fairbairn's good working relationship with Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies. The former had the confidence of his prime minister and the latter trusted his representative to secure a good deal for Canberra.<sup>22</sup> While Fairbairn was perturbed by Canada's tough negotiating style, he remained willing to stand Australia's ground,<sup>23</sup> in contrast to the British delegation's leader Riverdale, who cut an increasingly exhausted figure in negotiations—although this was probably because Riverdale arrived earlier, had multiple additional points to negotiate and remained in Ottawa until the final deal was concluded. Direct contact between Fairbairn and Menzies meant that the Australian War Cabinet was closely informed of the negotiating process, including the Canadian approach to proceedings,<sup>24</sup> so that it could consider information and alter instructions fluidly. Upon receiving the proposal of the

scheme in its first iteration in a telegram from Fairbairn, Canberra drew up comparisons of overall spending on imperial defence and Australia's trade deficit with Canada to highlight what it felt was the inequitable distribution of costs. Further examination addressed the residual benefits—in equipment, infrastructure, defence and the economy—that Canada would likely accrue from a scheme to which, in its original form, Australia would be paying without receiving these same advantages.<sup>25</sup>

As negotiations floundered due to Anglo-Canadian differences, the Australian War Cabinet took the idea of withdrawal from the talks under serious consideration, asking the Australian Air Board to calculate whether conducting all of its training domestically was feasible. The response was negative, if plans for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) expansion and the ambitious imperial contribution envisioned by Canberra were to be achieved. Within Australia, factoring in British assistance, seven-ninths of the proposed RAAF commitments could be met—some advanced training would need to occur in Canada to meet the full scheme.<sup>26</sup> Fairbairn, who had suggested a 50–50 split between Australia and Canada for advanced training, was now asked for his opinion on whether Australia could negotiate a higher domestic training quota or extricate itself from North American training entirely.<sup>27</sup> Fairbairn, increasingly frustrated at the Canadian approach to negotiations, concurred with suggestions in Canberra that Australia might be better off not getting involved at all—it was only the perceived impact of rejecting the Canadian scheme, namely that Australia would display a lack of imperial unity, which dissuaded him from fully supporting this course of action.<sup>28</sup> Australia's capacity for seven-ninths of its own training, coupled with the desire to play its fullest part in the air war, dictated Fairbairn's final negotiating position. The Australian delegation remained at the table long enough to conclude a deal, but the serious consideration given to abandoning negotiations highlights the extent of Canberra's frustration at the proposals, events and attitudes in Ottawa.

Why did the visiting delegations experience so much difficulty in Canada? Despite initial enthusiasm for the scheme, King ensured the Canadian delegation negotiated firmly.<sup>29</sup> He forbade formal pre-negotiation discussions between the Canadian and UK teams; he began the proceedings by reading out Chamberlain's initial telegram to make it clear that the UK had proposed the scheme, so it was primarily a UK responsibility;<sup>30</sup> and he punctuated the negotiations with outbursts of anger directed at both the Riverdale delegation and the British High Commissioner, at one

point exclaiming ‘this is not our [Canada’s] war!’<sup>31</sup> Riverdale’s vague brief, presumptuous approach and hubris regarding the proposals confronted King’s deep insecurity over Canadian unity and British intentions, producing a combustible mix.<sup>32</sup>

Despite a multitude of initial complaints, as wartime pressures gradually mounted, Canadian demands were whittled down to five key points: a successful conclusion to the concurrent Anglo-Canadian financial negotiations occurring in London;<sup>33</sup> a British promise to underwrite the financial contribution of Australia and New Zealand to the scheme; a guarantee that Canada would have higher control over all training in Canada; a pledge that Canadian airmen would be associated with Canada as much as possible when graduating from the scheme; and a public declaration that the BCATP would be Canada’s most valuable contribution to the war.<sup>34</sup> The latter two points proved the thorniest.

King’s stubbornness secured the public declaration in the face of repeated British pleas, including from Chamberlain himself, but more difficult still was the issue of the final destination of Dominion aircrew once trained.<sup>35</sup> Indeed only the pressure of developing events on King, particularly the imminent arrival of Canada’s Expeditionary Force in the UK, and the use of a compromise clause, with the promise of future resolution, facilitated the signing of the agreement. This proviso, Article XV, read: ‘The United Kingdom undertakes that pupils of Canada, Australia and New Zealand shall, after training is completed, be identified with their respective Dominions.’<sup>36</sup>

If varied Anglo-Dominion relationships were evident during negotiations, the conclusion of discussions only further highlighted this disparity. The Pacific Dominion delegations could not wait in Ottawa until Anglo-Canadian differences were settled—the negotiations became so embarrassingly protracted that they both left having concluded only a separate agreement with the UK, with New Zealand pre-signing the unifying overall agreement in good faith and Australia empowering Riverdale to sign on its behalf.<sup>37</sup> While the Pacific Dominions accepted the terms in somewhat large brush strokes, the Canadian and British teams contested the agreement in fine detail. The precise wording and definition of several clauses were debated, and attempts to gain leverage were pursued through repeated recourse not just to prime ministers but even to the sickly Governor-General of Canada, Lord Tweedsmuir.<sup>38</sup> The compliance and trust displayed by the Pacific Dominions towards their Commonwealth partners was in stark contrast to Anglo-Canadian wrangling, actions that



reflected the pre-war attitudes of the three Dominions towards imperial defence and collective security commitments. The failure to find acceptable terms for dealing with the issue of national identity continued to hang over the scheme for some time, creating tension between the partners. Before turning to this topic, it is instructive to first look at how important the BCATP was within the global network of British air training schemes, to understand why the stakes were so high in those national identification discussions.

The BCATP was one part of a wider constellation of air training schemes that the UK set up in Allied and imperial territories.<sup>39</sup> For the airmen, in any training location, the path to graduation varied according to the role the pupil was designated, but certain steps were the same for the majority. After basic training, the cadets progressed to an Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), then a Service Flying Training School (SFTS) and, if they displayed the necessary aptitude, eventually into an Operational Training Unit (OTU). Essentially this was the A-B-C that was required to get into active operations. Initially, only the elementary and a limited amount of service training were considered suitable for decentralising to the Dominions. This was practical for a number of reasons, notably because elementary standard cadets were normally the least useful to have immediately available in a crisis and the least capable of handling any unexpected wartime emergencies. Additionally, the elementary training of cadets in their home countries allowed unsuitable applicants to be eliminated before paying for their journey overseas. SFTSs were potentially located anywhere, but most desirably in areas that also had elementary schools nearby, to facilitate 'all-through' training in one country, which was thought to be an expedient and beneficial way to train pupils.<sup>40</sup> Passing more pupils at any stage of the process than the next level could accommodate, such as excessive EFTS production before the SFTSs could absorb the cadets, created bottlenecks in the system. The administration of the scheme, conducted largely in the Dominions, was therefore very important to its success.

OTUs presented the greatest problems, because the most successful operational training occurred in theatres of war. Indeed, OTUs and the operational forces they fed were often extremely closely bound, through equipment, staff and crews. So, for instance, those cadets destined to fly in north-west Europe would ideally undertake operational training in the UK, because weather conditions, congested conurbations, blackouts and the real threat of enemy engagement all varied considerably between

Europe and the Dominions. As such, the benefits of OTUs training even advanced pupils in non-theatre conditions and varied geographical locations could be very limited.<sup>41</sup> This meant that the UK needed to maintain a reasonably large number of schools on its own finite territory, and therefore further incentive was provided to move other levels of training abroad. The distribution of schools, as shown in Table 8.1, displays how important this point was.

The figures show that the UK maintained a significant number of schools in the British Isles. The importance of European OTUs, in addition to the sheer number of aircrews required for RAF expansion, were the reasons for this. Yet the table also demonstrates the fundamental importance of the Commonwealth effort. In 1941 the Dominions were running significantly more schools than the UK (124:100) and again in 1942 (142:115). Even with the renewed emphasis on the bomber offensive, requiring OTUs in the European environment, and the subsequent jump in the number of UK schools in 1943, there were only four more training schools in the UK (153) than in the Dominions (149). By comparison, training establishments in Allied and colonial territories numbered over 100 fewer schools than either the UK or Dominion total at their peak. The Dominions were the major contributors in air training.

This is not to downplay the role of training in other locations, which occurred from the USA to India, and the Middle East to Southern Rhodesia. Most notably successful were the American and Southern Rhodesian schemes, the output of which can be seen in Table 8.2. The

**Table 8.1** British Air Training Schools by number and location

	<i>Total training schools</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>South Africa</i>	<i>Allied and colonial territories</i>
1940	113	67	19	11	6	5	5
1941	261	100	74	28	8	14	37
1942	303	115	87	26	6	23	46
1943	333	153	92	26	6	25	31
1944	284	127	71	20	6	23	37
1945 (8 May)	190	109	20	10	6	10	35

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), pp. 281–7

Dates 3 September unless otherwise stated

**Table 8.2** The output of the BCATP, by location, nationality and aircrew type

<i>Location of output</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Pilots</i>	<i>Observers and navigators</i>	<i>Air bombers</i>	<i>Wireless operators (air gunner)</i>	<i>Air gunners</i>	<i>Flight engineers</i>	<i>Total</i>
United Kingdom	RAF	15,287	9,869	728	27,190	28,243	17,885	99,202
	RIAF	15	4	1	6	2	—	28
	<i>Total</i>	15,302	9,873	729	27,196	28,245	17,885	99,230
Canada	RAF	22,068	15,778	7,581	755	2,096	—	48,278
	RCAF	25,918	12,885	6,659	12,744	12,917	1,913	73,006
	RAAF	4,045	1,643	799	2,875	244	—	9,606
	RNZAF	2,220	1,583	634	2,122	443	—	7,002
	RIAF	18	—	—	—	—	—	18
Australia	<i>Total</i>	54,269	31,859	15,673	18,496	15,700	1,913	137,910
	RAAF	10,998	5,929	159	7,158	3,286	369	27,899
	RNZAF	6,118	165	—	—	208	—	6,491

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), pp. 279–80

American scheme was initiated before that country was even a belligerent, while the Southern Rhodesian effort was extremely substantial given that the colony had a white settler community of only around 45,000.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, aircrew produced in Allied territories and the colonial empire throughout the war amounted to only around 9 per cent of total output, compared to over 60 per cent from the Dominions.<sup>43</sup> Air training was overwhelmingly reliant upon the British Commonwealth.

The main Dominion training scheme, incorporating the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, was the BCATP. The impact of the BCATP on RAF personnel numbers is shown in Table 8.2. During the course of the war, the UK training establishment managed to output just under 100,000 aircrew; in the same period, the three BCATP Dominions trained over 170,000 air personnel. Training output was therefore more than two and a half times as large as it would have been if relying solely on the UK's output.

These achievements are further highlighted by breaking down the roles that personnel were destined for upon graduation. With the vast training establishments abroad, the UK could become selective regarding the type of training deemed suitable for the wartime conditions of the British Isles. So, while large numbers of wireless operators and air gunners were being trained in the UK, pilot and air bomber training was largely conducted in the safer Dominion skies. Indeed the flexibility of the scheme as a whole—for instance allowing New Zealand to almost entirely focus on pilot training domestically, but still have a significant number of wireless operators trained in Canada—was one of its major strengths. This was so successful because Canada filled this role as the hub of advanced training. Aside from training all of its own airmen, almost 50,000 RAF aircrew, as well as over 25 per cent of all RAAF graduates and nearly 50 per cent of all Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) graduates, were produced in Canadian aerodromes. Almost as significant as the numbers, however, are the dates by which the BCATP began to truly come into its own, as shown in Table 8.3.

The impact of the BCATP was most significant from the second half of 1941 because of the time required to train aircrew and develop such an ambitious scheme, especially given the lack of pre-war preparations. The fact that the smallest Dominion, New Zealand, was the most productive in training airmen between September 1939 and September 1940 was a testament to the fact that it was the only Dominion with wartime air training plans in place with the RAF before the outbreak of war.

**Table 8.3** BCATP output by country and year

<i>Country of graduation</i>	<i>1939–40</i>	<i>1940–1</i>	<i>1941–2</i>	<i>1942–3</i>	<i>1943–4</i>	<i>1944–5</i>
Canada	171	9,275	25,543	36,863	43,003	23,435
Australia	143	1,679	5,332	9,457	6,423	4,875
NZ	882	1174	1,334	1,144	1,178	779
BCATP Dominions	1,196	12,128	32,209	47,464	50,604	40,526
Total						
UK	7,830	17,424	17,870	23,864	20,805	11,437

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), pp. 273–8

Nevertheless, by late 1941 the BCATP scheme was the major driving force behind the expansion of the RAF in terms of personnel. It is clear, however, that it did not truly fulfil its potential until 1942. This was the year that Arthur Harris took control of the bomber offensive over Germany, inspiring renewed hopes of crippling the German war economy. Such an ambitious RAF strategy would have been impossible, given the demands of the RAF's other roles, without the immense and steady stream of aircrew flowing out from the Dominions. With these men, Bomber Command was not just maintained, but consistently expanded in size, despite the devastating losses that bombing Germany entailed.<sup>44</sup> Such reliance on Dominion manpower caused considerable friction within the Commonwealth alliance, in part born from the terms of the original agreement.

## NOTES

1. For problems with the lack of an official title and the various forms used by the Dominions, see Air Training Scheme Co-Ordination, DO 35/1081/1; and, Organization & Establishment—Designations and Abbreviations CTO, JATP, BCATP & CTE, RG24, vol. 3214.
2. The RFC was British Army's air section until it merged with the Royal Naval Air Service to form the RAF on 1 April 1918.
3. Memorandum – 'Re: Establishment by the British Government of training school of airmen on Canadian territory', 11 September 1936, Mackenzie King papers, J4, vol. 151, file 1274; 'The Imperial-Flying-School-In-Canada Idea', L.C. Christie, 19 June 1938, Office of the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs papers, vol. 755, file 243.

4. S. Dunmore, *Wings for Victory: The Remarkable Story of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada* (Toronto, 1994), p. 35; A. Stewart, 'The British and Canadian "Empire Air Training Scheme" negotiations', *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 93, 377 (2004), 739–754, pp. 741–742. See also 'Empire Air Training Scheme, Historical Review', Department of Air, AWM 138, 1, p. 2; and N. Hillmer, 'Vincent Massey and the Origins of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan', *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 16, 4 (1987), 49–56.
5. Prime Minister to Dominions, 26 September 1939, CAB 21/499.
6. Eden to Chamberlain, 25 September 1939, PREM 1/397.
7. Prime Minister to Dominions, 26 September 1939, CAB 21/499.
8. Prime Minister to Dominions, 26 September 1939, CAB 21/499. The scheme did not pass unnoticed abroad, with *Time* magazine, for instance, reporting on its inauguration (13 November 1939) 'In the Air: Wings for an Empire', *Time*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,789594-1,00.html>, last accessed 1 February 2014.
9. King made repeated reference in his diary to fighting alongside the UK rather than for the empire, on one occasion explicitly stating that the logical position for Canada was 'at the side of Britain, and not to begin to play the role of those who want Empire war'. 4 December 1940, MG26-J13.
10. For more on the diplomatic relationship, see C. Baxter & A. Stewart (eds), *Diplomats at War: British and Commonwealth Diplomacy in Wartime* (Boston, 2008); A. Stewart, *Empire Lost: Britain, the Dominions and the Second World War* (London, 2008). See also, the special issue on Dominion High Commissioners in London in the Second World War, in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40, 1 (2012).
11. 'Mission to Canada in connection with the Dominion Air Training Scheme', Memorandum, 27 October, 1939, AIR 20/340.
12. Stewart, "Empire Air Training Scheme".
13. 'Mission to Canada in connection with the Dominion Air Training Scheme', Memorandum, 27 October, 1939, AIR 20/340.
14. Sir Gerald Campbell, the British High Commissioner in Canada, described King as 'the narrowest of narrow Canadian nationalists'. RAF: Air Training Scheme in Canada, PREM 1/397.
15. Campbell to Eden, 19 December 1939, PREM 1/397. See also K. Fedorowich, "Caught in the Crossfire": Sir Gerald Campbell,

- Lord Beaverbrook and the near demise of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, May-October 1940', *The Journal of Military History*, 79, 1 (January 2015), 37–68.
16. Ross, *RNZAF*, p. 51.
  17. 'Mission to Canada in connection with the Dominion Air Training Scheme', Memorandum, 27 October, 1939, AIR 20/340.
  18. Norman to Rae, 20 July 1943, AIR103/4/9.
  19. Rae to Norman, 25 June 1943, AIR103/4/9.
  20. See Fairbairn's speech in Canberra on 23 April 1940, reported in the *Canberra Times*, 23 April 1940, RG24, vol. 1858.
  21. Such was the cool reception King provided to his Pacific guests, Fairbairn later stated he 'had a hard time controlling his anger' following the treatment of his and the New Zealand delegations by the Canadian government. 1 November and 27 November 1939, MG26-J13. See also, Stewart, "Empire Air Training Scheme", p. 747.
  22. Papers concerning the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS)—Conferences and Boards—Rhodesia, AA1966/5, 326.
  23. Fairbairn to UK, New Zealand and Canada delegations, 22 November 1940, AA1966/5, 326.
  24. Correspondence of Whiskard and Eden, 1 January to 27 February 1940, DO 35/1003/1.
  25. Report from the Finance Officer on Empire Air Defence Scheme, 7 November 1939, A816, 44/301/20. See also Treasury comments agreed by Cabinet, sent to Fairbairn 17 November 1939, AA1966/5, 326.
  26. Report by the Air Board, 16 November 1939, AA1966/5, 326.
  27. Menzies to Fairbairn, 21 November 1939, AA1966/5, 326.
  28. Telephone conversation, Menzies and Fairbairn, 22 November 1939, AA1966/5, 326.
  29. For King's initial enthusiasm, see 28 September 1939, MG26-J13.
  30. Memorandum re interview between British Air Mission and Committee of Cabinet in Prime Minister's Office, 31 October 1939, MG 27 III B 20, vol. 51. See also, 31 October 1939, MG26-J13.
  31. Campbell to Eden, 1 November 1939, DO 35/1003/1.
  32. King complained of Riverdale's 'sort of taken-for-granted attitude that it was our duty and obligation, and that the part of the mission was only to tell what we would be expected to do'. 17 October and 31 October, 1939, MG26-J13.

33. King to Chamberlain, 3 November 1939, RG24, vol. 1858.
34. 'Mission to Canada in connection with the Dominion Air Training Scheme', Memorandum, 27 October, 1939, AIR 20/340.
35. Campbell to Eden, 26 November 1939, CAB 21/499.
36. Appendix, 'Mission to Canada in connection with the Dominion Air Training Scheme', Memorandum, 27 October, 1939, AIR 20/340.
37. Campbell to Whiskard, 17 December 1939, AA1966/5, 326.
38. 1 November and 16 December 1939, MG26-J13.
39. For more on the BCATP, see P. Conrad, *Training for Victory: The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in the West* (Saskatoon, 1989); S. Dunmore, *Wings for Victory*; F.J. Hatch, *Aerodrome of Democracy: Canada and the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1983).
40. J. Golley, *Aircrew Unlimited: The Commonwealth Air Training Plan* (Sparkford, 1993), p. 65.
41. Air Ministry, *Second World War, 1939-1945: RAF Flying Training, Policy and Planning* (London, 1952), AIR 10/551, p. 152. See also, J. Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-45: Series III, Air; Vol. III Air War against Germany and Italy 1939-1943* (Canberra, 1954), p. 117.
42. Golley, *Aircrew Unlimited*, p. 35.
43. See Appendix 1.
44. Statistics from Air Ministry, *RAF Flying Training*, AIR 10/551, Appendix No.2, p. 230; M. Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London, 2010), p. 482; C.K. Webster and N. Frankland, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945* (London, 1961), p. 286.



## National Identity and the RAF

The failure on the part of the Dominions to ensure that the huge number of airmen they were producing ended up in Dominion air forces, or in Dominion squadrons within the RAF, has tarnished the success of the scheme in the minds of some national historians. On the Australian side, McCarthy has argued that the colonial-esque distribution of aircrew upon graduation made the BCATP *A Last Call of Empire*, while Stephens has lambasted the Menzies and Curtin governments for providing the RAF with a steady procession of young Australians to be used as ‘cannon-fodder’.<sup>1</sup> King, often a divisive character for Canadian historians, has been assessed in a more balanced manner. If some historians feel he abandoned the opportunity to establish a truly substantial Canadian presence through squadron numbers on the front line, others have acknowledged the Canadian government’s persistence, unlike Australia and New Zealand, in attempting to rectify a problematic and unsatisfactory situation, a partly successful endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

Within the massive effort the Dominions produced, the differing approaches shown by the Dominions during the negotiations of 1939 continued during the scheme’s operation. Lines of demarcation between national and imperial identities—including the limits of a global Britishness based on ethnicity and imperial citizenship—that could be left blurred in peacetime needed to be sharply defined in war. The precedent for this had been set in the Great War when the Dominions successfully pushed for

greater autonomy for their ground forces in divisions and corps within the imperial armies. Individual operations in 1914–18 produced nation-binding legacies from Gallipoli to Vimy Ridge. Where Anglo-Dominion Great War efforts were less obviously demarcated, however, such as in the air with the RFC, the contribution of the Dominions was more easily obscured and obtained much smaller currency in national collective memory.<sup>3</sup> This chapter compares the Australian and Canadian experiences in promoting their national identities within the RAF in the Second World War.

In all three services, the extent to which Dominion forces were to be assimilated into British military structures and under British command created opportunities for friction and debate. It was only with the air forces, however, that the majority of Dominion servicemen fell directly under British control upon the completion of training. Under the terms of the BCATP agreement, the Air Ministry had the right to distribute the majority of graduates into RAF squadrons as it saw fit, with the proviso of Article XV, a clause entailing future Anglo-Dominion discussions on identity. The importance of this passage to the Dominions should not be underestimated. The Canadian Minister for Air, Charles Power, described it as ‘a saving clause ... to keep the status of young Canadians to something other than that of hirelings and mercenaries of another State, which however closely we may be associated with it by ties of blood ... is not the homeland of these young men’.<sup>4</sup>

Dominion graduates emerged from training schools as individuals, not evenly weighted aircrews, which meant that operational training threw together airmen as they became available, regardless of nationality. When the numbers of operational Dominion men in active service became adequate to form national squadrons, this regrouping therefore meant breaking up established, but cosmopolitan, aircrews. Thus Dominion governments had to balance their political will for national concentration against the operational reality that squadrons based solely on nationality would not necessarily be the most experienced or efficient, potentially risking the lives of their personnel. Factors such as the provision of ground crews and the effects on the morale of Dominion airmen also affected the decision-making process.

The Great War experience and interwar politics led the Dominions to seek a recognisable effort in the air war. This did not mean numbers of trained men being haphazardly strewn throughout the RAF where the Air Ministry felt appropriate; it meant numbers of front-line squadrons

bearing the names and aircrew of each Dominion. What transpired, however, was the presence of men from Canada, Australia and New Zealand in *almost every* RAF squadron, acknowledging their Dominion through national uniforms, but lost amongst what was, and often continues to be considered, a British effort.

The situation was resolved initially in the winter of 1940–1 with the Ralston-Sinclair Agreement, which provided for a quota of Dominion squadrons based on the numbers of men they were providing.<sup>5</sup> This meant that the RAF was committed to incrementally producing Dominion squadrons—such as No. 400 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF)—within its structure.<sup>6</sup> But the Air Ministry retained the right in principle to distribute aircrew into RAF squadrons, with no obligation to ensure that Dominion airmen ended up in their national Dominion squadrons. Put simply, this meant many squadrons were only nominally Dominion—for instance, one so-called Royal Australian Air Force squadron, upon creation in September 1942, contained just a single Australian in its crew! Indeed Australian membership in these Article XV RAAF squadrons rarely exceeded 50 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Of the 27,387 Australians who graduated from the BCATP, nearly 4,000 more served in RAF squadrons than in the RAAF,<sup>8</sup> and by the time Germany surrendered, Australians were still present in 220 different RAF squadrons.<sup>9</sup>

At the Ottawa Air Training Conference of 1942—an Allied gathering to renew the BCATP and discuss air training problems—Canadian Prime Minister King pointed out that Canadians were currently serving in *over 600* RAF units.<sup>10</sup> This led to concerted Canadian attempts to secure in the new training agreement a recognisable Canadian front-line presence and higher Canadian representation in Article XV RCAF squadrons. This membership did increase in the following years, and the creation of the Canadian 6th Bomber Group, the largest Dominion unit to function in the air war, added to the visible RCAF presence on the front line.<sup>11</sup> Australia failed to achieve a similar independent status for its RAF formations.

How can we explain this Canadian success? Australia certainly desired national concentration and this was conveyed during, and even before,<sup>12</sup> the Ottawa negotiations.<sup>13</sup> For Canberra, the lack of a striking air combat legacy from the Great War was reinforced by the experience of Australians being anonymously submerged within the RAF during the interwar period.<sup>14</sup> Yet operational realities weighed heavily on Australian decision-making. The fear that pushing Australian graduates into new squadrons solely on the basis of nationality risked separating them from crews that

had learnt to function successfully together at OTUs in the UK, or depriving them of learning in the field amongst experienced personnel from other nations, led to the adoption of 'infiltration'.<sup>15</sup> Under this plan, Australian membership in existing squadrons would be steadily enhanced by infiltrating increasing numbers of Australian personnel into them, until at 75 per cent Australian the squadron could be designated as RAAF.<sup>16</sup> This process was inevitably slow and quite unsuccessful in practice, opening the Australian government up to the criticism of contemporaries and historians alike.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, such attacks should be tempered. Successive Australian wartime governments did sacrifice strategic control over their airmen, but they never gave up attempts to concentrate Australian airmen. From sending Australians and New Zealanders in groups of at least 15 men for training,<sup>18</sup> through to the adoption of RAAF uniforms, and then sanctioning infiltration primarily to minimise the risks of inexperienced aircrews suffering devastating losses for the political rationale of national concentration, the Australian government tried to balance identity with welfare. Significant concessions were gained from the RAF: the Air Ministry agreed to man RAAF squadrons entirely with Australians, and Canberra successfully fought for Australians to be included in the process of appointing Australian graduates to squadrons.<sup>19</sup> These proactive steps improved the situation; but inevitably, Australian governments could not solve these problems in their entirety: the disconnect between strategic control and Canberra was such that the theatres of operation Australian airmen participated in were not always known by the government until after operations had occurred;<sup>20</sup> likewise, Canberra was unable to recall Australian airmen to boost home defence after Japanese entry into the war, despite its role in training them.<sup>21</sup>

Ottawa conversely privileged its political objectives over potential operational risk, believing that its policy of 'Canadianisation' would enhance all aspects of its airmen's welfare and experience. Canada enjoyed greater success in achieving national concentration also because of its stronger hand in negotiations, a bolder conception of what it hoped to achieve regarding identity in its armed forces and an individualist approach. Producing almost 140,000 aircrew, Canada was the hub of all air training: the entire scheme rested on continued Canadian goodwill, Canadian dollars and Canadian participation. Australian withdrawal could have been hugely embarrassing and eventually difficult to accommodate (Canadian schools were expecting Australian pupils after all), but by no means impossible to

surmount. Indeed, when Australia did briefly suspend its participation in the scheme following Japanese belligerency,<sup>22</sup> the UK and Canada were able to temporarily bridge the gap in pupils. And whereas Ottawa prioritised the importance of Canadianising its aircrews, this was in stark contrast to Canberra's adoption of infiltration. Despite entailing similar details, the lexical difference and subsequent connotations that come to mind are striking: one is a display of confidence, an overt expression of identity and a refusal to compromise; the other suggests a covert operation.

Canada consistently chose to negotiate the issue of Article XV bilaterally with the UK, leaving Australia and New Zealand to do the same.<sup>23</sup> This was most likely due to Ottawa's knowledge of its unique position of strength, its unawareness of the extent of Australian national feeling and perhaps also insecurity over perceived Pacific Dominion imperial affinity.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, one reason that Australia avoided a firmer approach was the belief that the matter was one for the Dominions to discuss collectively with the UK, and it was Canada's refusal to do this in early 1940 that was deemed to be an obstacle to the proceedings.<sup>25</sup> Even at the 1942 Ottawa Air Training Conference, when the agenda was split into an Allied section and a British Commonwealth section (to discuss 'family matters' after other delegations had left),<sup>26</sup> Canada insisted that BCATP negotiations on expressing its national identity within the RAF were solely Anglo-Canadian.<sup>27</sup>

This was unintentionally to Australia's detriment, as Canada achieved much greater success in unifying its airmen—one reason why the BCATP has enjoyed much greater commemoration in Canada than in Australia.<sup>28</sup> Australia was unable to push the matter to any similar degree, and therefore finished the war without as greatly recognisable and independent a front-line effort in the air. But if Canada's position was so strong, why could the Dominion not insist entirely upon its own terms for Canadianisation?

More influential in the debate over national squadrons than the potentially hazardous and counterproductive process of dismantling heterogeneous aircrews for national concentration, was a frequently forgotten yet crucial aspect of air operations.<sup>29</sup> The often unappreciated ground crews—upon which air forces relied to operate—regularly outnumbered the flying personnel by margins as significant as 7:1.<sup>30</sup> For all the prevalence of Dominion airmen in the RAF, significantly it was the UK that supplied the overwhelming majority of ground crews. Without Dominion air training, the UK would not have had adequate numbers of flying personnel for the RAF, but without the UK's ground crews, Dominion airmen would

not have been capable of flying in such great numbers. In this way, the Dominion RAF contribution paralleled the Dominion reliance on British artillery, logistics and tail services on the ground during the Great War. This symbiosis was further reflected in Anglo-Dominion ground forces fighting in the North African theatre in 1940–3.<sup>31</sup>

This complementarity was recognised on both sides and facilitated a compromise on the number of Dominion squadrons to be formed within the RAF.<sup>32</sup> In Canada, for instance, its ground crew limitations were widely acknowledged. Answering one letter on why, with so many airmen all across the RAF, Canada did not insist on more Canadian squadrons or consider operating independently, the Minister for Air responded that, ‘I haven’t the slightest doubt but that the ground crew in the RAF outnumbers ours many, many times even if you take into consideration all the ground crews we have employed in Canada on coast defence, anti-submarine patrol and convoy operations and as staff and maintenance for the Air Training Plan.’<sup>33</sup> Based on internal assessments, Canada was considered to have the ground crews sufficient for about 27 squadrons: 25 Article XV squadrons became the target in negotiations with the UK, since it seemed like a reasonable figure to request and avoided Canada being tied to any specific formula.<sup>34</sup>

It would be incorrect to assume, however, that the UK wanted to maintain complete dominance over this area. As manpower became increasingly strained, repeated requests were sent to the Dominions to encourage Article XV squadrons to be manned with national ground crews, freeing stretched British resources for other roles.<sup>35</sup> These pleas met with limited fulfilment, due to shortages of skilled personnel and because the network of aerodromes by then established across the Dominions also needed to be staffed with sufficient numbers on the ground.<sup>36</sup> Ground crew shortages really began to bite in late 1943, and they became so acute that in the latter stages of the war, the UK effected a ‘spectacular reduction’ in squadron numbers even before Germany was defeated, deeming certain aircrews redundant due to the lack of ground personnel to get them into the skies. As the war approached its conclusion in July 1945, the gap between ground crews and aircrews had become a yawning chasm—the UK found itself short of 12,000 officers alone in this area.<sup>37</sup>

Ground crews were therefore largely a British burden, but one which gave London leverage in negotiations over Dominion squadron numbers within the RAF and control over operational squadrons. These persistent identity negotiations highlight the questions of sovereignty of Dominion

forces once in the field, but they also reveal the pervasiveness of the Dominion effort and the extent to which the RAF was utterly reliant on the vast numbers of Dominion aircrew that were being produced. The Air Ministry was slow to group these men together in any way that might lessen British control over the massive output that the BCATP was providing.

Looking more closely at the Canadian example, the experience of Canadian airmen is instructive on the viewpoints of personnel regarding the issue of national Dominion or global British identities. Canadianisation met with resistance from some Canadian and Allied airmen. One Australian Group Captain wrote that the Canadian government's policy demonstrated a 'failure to face realities' for the sake of 'trivial political considerations'.<sup>38</sup> This was an understandable complaint from men on the front line risking their lives during operations. Some airmen even equated the importance of having the right chemistry among an aircrew to that in a successful marriage. Furthermore, the dissolution of a team that had repeatedly returned safely from operations over the Reich and German-occupied territories—something that airmen were bitterly aware was too frequently interrupted by capture or death<sup>39</sup>—was likened in one account to the trauma of breaking up a happy family.<sup>40</sup> With squadrons often adopting their own distinctive pre-flight rituals and off-duty social patterns, it is little wonder that settled Dominion men resisted or deeply regretted transferring to national formations.

What appeared as trivial politics to the Australian Group Captain and other disappointed or angry airmen was anything but that in Ottawa, where the goal of nationalisation was in fact seen as the best guarantee of the welfare of Canadians. In Anglo-Canadian negotiations over national identity in 1942, the British were told that, 'Our men's lives are being risked and we have aught to say about it. It is a different thing for us to control our own people than for you. We have a much smaller population, national prestige.' Yet even here it was accepted 'that where it would interfere with operations', Canada should hold back.<sup>41</sup> Indeed there were contemporary suggestions that all-Canadian squadrons were suffering with poorer equipment and higher losses.<sup>42</sup> The Canadian government argued that it was in fact only through national concentration, in which Canada would be directly responsible for the welfare of its men, that it could adequately protect Canadians.<sup>43</sup> Air Minister Charles Power summed up his government's position: it was only acceptable to be under RAF tactical command, providing there were distinctly Canadian squadrons, wings and, if possible, groups.<sup>44</sup>

Nor were airmen unanimously against Canadianisation. Unsurprisingly with thousands of men graduating, a large variety of responses to the plan covered the spectrum from absolute refusal to enthusiastic support. In May 1943, a survey conducted by the nationalistic Canadian Air HQ in the UK suggested that *over 90 per cent* of Canadian airmen desired Canadianisation,<sup>45</sup> yet most other (and less biased) reports show distinctly balanced responses.<sup>46</sup> One reason for this was growing Canadian national identity. Unlike many Britons, Australians and New Zealanders, the Commonwealth interaction experienced by Canadians throughout training was in their homeland, often under the guidance of Canadian instructors. One official described young English-Canadians upon entering training as displaying little political knowledge, while holding inherited biases, notably an ‘imperial fervency’ and second-hand anti-French feeling. By graduation, it was claimed, they were Canadians.<sup>47</sup>

An insightful yet neglected source highlights just how varied the opinions of Canadian airmen were towards Canadianisation. The censor’s reading of homeward-bound mail sent by Canadians based in the UK summarises the debate as both proponents and detractors viewed it. For some, Canadianisation was nothing more than a political tool designed to increase the stature of Canadian politicians—even to the point of breaking down otherwise cordial imperial relations: ‘We used to get on very well with the English boys, & I am quite sure they enjoyed our company’ wrote one disgruntled Canadian. The most damaging and persistently cited impact of the programme was, however, the breaking up of effective but cosmopolitan bomber crews.<sup>48</sup> One flyer commented that it was ‘purely a political move ... and cannot add one bomb to the air offensive’—a situation created by, in another’s opinion, ‘Members of Parliament [who] don’t know what the real story is.’ This sentiment was summed up succinctly by one Canadian officer who complained that Canadianisation represented nothing more than ‘colonial petty politics at their worst, dressed up as a “national urge”’.<sup>49</sup>

Conversely, issues of pay and promotion—both of which were more liberal for Canadians compared to their RAF counterparts—raised real tensions between Canadian airmen and their Commonwealth partners, making nationally homogeneous units more desirable. Likewise, those men who felt homesick, operating in the UK for years so far from Canada, were often genuine proponents of all-Canadian formations. Media portrayals of RAF successes, with little mention of whether squadrons were all-British



or Dominion-dominated, were also a persistent irritant for Dominion airmen.<sup>50</sup> But the most vociferous comments on either side of the debate were the preserve of nationalists, who generally claimed to speak for every Canadian in spite of any evidence to the contrary—one such Canadian forcefully informed his superiors that those against Canadianisation were ‘crazy’. He concluded, ‘I can assure you that all Canadian personnel are in favour of it.’ This was the most extreme position, but many Canadian airmen undoubtedly and whole-heartedly supported the policy.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of pitting national identity against a perceived global Britishness or sense of imperial citizenship, however, Canadianisation was a success. Merely sparking the debate over the extent and implementation of Canadianisation served to increase self-awareness for all Canadians as to their separate identity, regardless of imperial or national inclinations.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore pursuing this policy alongside the system of individual national rates of pay and promotion, exactly when interaction amongst the various Commonwealth air forces was most intense, served to heighten a sense of individual identity for each of the Dominion nations, not to mention the UK. Indeed British commanders, who regularly blurred the lines between Dominion and global British identities by viewing all their men under the umbrella ‘British’ term, were increasingly forced to recognise the BCATP forces as an alliance of four nations during operations, despite London still enjoying overall strategic control.

## NOTES

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11. Draft Parliamentary Statement, 4 June 1942, RG-19-E1-e, vol. 2724. See also, ‘Appendix G’ of Minutes of the Third Meeting of the Chairmen’s Committee, 26 August 1942, RG24, vol. 5389.
12. Bruce to Menzies, 15 September 1939, A5954, 582/9.
13. For instance, Menzies to Fairbairn, 22 November 1939, AA1966/5, 326. For a list of Cabinet statements, November–December 1939, on the central importance to Canberra of RAAF squadrons manned by Australians retaining national identity, see, ‘Retention of Australian Identity of Members of the RAAF under the Empire Air Scheme References’, A5954, 236/5.
14. ‘Air Training Narrative Report’, Papers Concerning the EATS: History (Part 1), A1966/5, 324. See also, D. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945* (Canberra, 1982), pp. 44–5.
15. EATS: Formation of RAAF squadrons manned by Australian aircrews and infiltration of ground staffs RAAF Headquarters abroad, A5954, 236/5. See also Canadian Air Vice-Marshal Breadner, Chief of the Air Staff, using the term for Canada in, Breadner to Prime Minister King, 12 October 1940, RCAF papers, vol. 5178.
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17. See, for instance, the government's response to domestic critics, reported in *The Herald*, 22 July 1941, A5954, 236/5.
18. Deschamps to Department of External Affairs, 17 April 1940 and 20 May 1940, A3095, 1/1/10 Part 1. For New Zealand, see 'Report of the Chief of the Air Staff to the Members of the Supervisory Board', 6 May 1940, AIR 1/720, 29/1/11 Part 1.
19. Menzies to Bruce, 12 June 1941, AA1966/5, 326; Department of Defence Minute for the Prime Minister, 25 June 1941, AA1966/5, 326.
20. See EATS: Employment of EATS Squadrons – Commonwealth Government to Receive Prior Notice, A5954, 236/8.
21. Kellway to Glasgow, 4 April 1942, A3095, 1/1/10 Part 1. See also, Section 9, 1942 Discussions and Commitments, AA1966/5, 326.
22. Outbreak of War with Japan, December 1941: EATS Personnel – Despatch Abroad, NAA, A5954, 236/11.
23. Eden to Skelton and reply, 24 February and 5 March 1940, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2]. See also, Appendix 'T' of Minutes of Third Meeting of Chairmen's Committee, held 26/5/42, RCAF papers, vol. 5389.
24. 1 November 1939, MG26-J13.
25. Bruce to Menzies, 1 and 8 February 1940, A5954, 236/5.
26. See Balfour's words reported in the *Citizen*, 22 May 1942, RCAF papers, vol. 3528.
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28. S. Evans, 'The Empire Air Training Scheme: Identity, Empire and Memory', (PhD dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2010).
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30. 'The Empire Air Scheme: What It Involves and How It Increases Australian Security', A5954, 236/5; 'RCAF and Air Training Scheme 1940', MG 27 III B II, vol. 166.
31. See Part IV.
32. Skelton to Massey, 29 January 1941, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2].
33. Power to Philpott, 2 February 1944, D1028-D1029, Box 58 II.

34. Ralston to King and Power, undated, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2].
35. Bruce to Commonwealth Government, 11 Dec 1942, A2671, 4/1943.
36. Secretary of State for External Affairs to Canadian High Commissioner, London, 29 January 1941, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2].
37. Air Vice-Marshal Carnegie to Chief of the Air Staff, RCAF, 16 July 1945, RCAF papers, vol. 5264.
38. Minute Sheet, minute 19, 7 February 1942, A1196, 12/501/75.
39. Over 50 per cent of Bomber Command aircrews were killed, and just 25 per cent escaped the war having evaded death, capture or serious injury. W. Murray, *War in the Air, 1914–45* (London, 1999), p. 24.
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41. Minutes of a Meeting of the Chairmen’s Committee, 23 May 1942, RCAF papers, vol. 5389.
42. BCATP Agreement Amended Appendix IV, C.G. Power papers, Box 6. See also, M. Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London, 1979), pp. 214, 235.
43. Notes of a meeting held at the Air Ministry, London, 8 July 1941, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2].
44. Recorded in the *Journal*, 23 May 1942, RCAF papers, vol. 3528.
45. Luke to Power, 31 May 1943, C.G. Power papers, D1028-D1029, Box 58, II; Minutes of a Meeting of the Chairmen’s Committee, 23 May 1942, RCAF papers, vol. 5389.
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48. ‘Formation of All-Canadian Squadrons’ report, 14 December 1942, C.G. Power papers, D1028-D1029, Box 58, II.
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50. Meeting at the Air Ministry, London, 8 July 1941, Department of External Affairs papers, vol. 6287, file part [1.2].
51. A.I.S. Report, C.G. Power papers, D1028-D1029, Box 58, II.
52. *Citizen*, 21 May 1942, RCAF papers, vol. 3528; P. Marshall, ‘The British Commonwealth air training plan’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 89, 354 (2000), 267–278, p. 274.

## On the Fringes: South Africa and Air Training

South Africa did not participate in the BCATP, and in fact remained relatively aloof from the whole Commonwealth element of air training until the Ottawa Air Training Conference in 1942.<sup>1</sup> The UK, however, was happy just to have the politically divided Dominion in the war in September 1939. Once Prime Minister Jan Smuts achieved this feat, he was in a position that virtually prohibited any dictation of policy from London; the precariousness of his political power meant that, unlike his Commonwealth counterparts, he was particularly obliged—and permitted by London—to prioritise domestic politics over imperial strategy. Under the guidance of the South African High Commissioner in the UK, Sidney Waterson, Pretoria was informed of the BCATP proposal but not invited to join. Nevertheless London made it clear that if participation was considered possible, the proposal did not preclude South African entry.<sup>2</sup> Smuts contended that the timing of such a large commitment was not right for South Africa so early in the war.

South Africa preferred to maintain its airmen for domestic needs. The country was in the process of completing its own defence plans, which involved the expansion of the South African Air Force (SAAF), and did not wish to divert its limited white manpower to the RAF—at least not unless this was entirely on its own terms and after it had first provided for South African defence.<sup>3</sup> The Union government sold its participation in the war to its divided population on the basis of the benefits of the

Commonwealth relationship and, to appease less moderate Afrikaners, initially limited its participation to regional defence. Prior to 1941, regional defence extended to the Union's perceived areas of vital interests, a boundary that extended as far north as Tanganyika and Kenya.<sup>4</sup> As the war progressed, the Union's definition of interests became an increasingly imperial conception, although this was still publicly defined as regional, extending first to the entire African continent, facilitating participation in the North African theatre, and then to the Mediterranean, allowing the Union Defence Force (UDF) to fight as far north as Italy. This conception of 'regional' defence was therefore imperial-regional rather than merely national, because it encompassed the UK's imperial power in the Mediterranean and acknowledged the importance of the Suez Canal as an imperial communications nexus.

Nevertheless the public perception that the Union was fighting in its own interests, and not for the UK's imperial position, was considered crucial to maintaining Smuts' power in South Africa. This meant distancing the Union from higher strategy and abiding by the publicly announced geographical limits of South Africa's participation. Pretoria warned Waterson to guard against press reports when the South African Minister for Native Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Colonel Deneyz Reitz visited the UK in 1939, fearing that his presence 'might place him in an embarrassing situation on his return vis-à-vis the Dutch population of the Union'.<sup>5</sup> When South Africa first provided airmen for the RAF, a small number of volunteers, Waterson was cautioned against allowing the press to mention their presence in the UK. Reports that South African pilots had operated in Burma for the RAF caused the Union government 'embarrassment', but by January 1942 Waterson was forced to request that the Union acknowledge the growing presence of its airmen in the UK, citing the fact that 'officers wear distinctive South African Air Force uniforms', and therefore 'do not go about unnoticed'.<sup>6</sup> By this time, the South African training programme with the RAF was in operation in the Union, and South Africa was willing to take this step; however, the Union's involvement with the RAF was always complicated by the potential domestic opposition that it could raise.

There were several factors that compelled South Africa to broach the possibility of an air training scheme on its own territory, even one that included the provision of South African airmen for the RAF. One of these was the lack of training facilities that existed for developing the SAAF. If the RAF could be induced to fund aerodrome construction or provide

training aircraft, anything to reduce the burden on South Africa and stimulate growth of the Union's air power, this would assist Pretoria's plans for SAAF expansion.<sup>7</sup> Whether in the form of SAAF training schools that would allow both South Africans and UK cadets to train, or alternatively by moving existing RAF schools en bloc to South Africa—in which South Africans could participate in the construction, administration and actual training—expansion of the SAAF could continue apace with British assistance. As ever, this was a Dominion air force that required the RAF to provide the tools for rapid expansion, a deal which, given the reciprocal benefits, including furthering South African commitment to the war effort, the UK was willing to make.<sup>8</sup>

Another consideration for South Africa was the success of the Southern Rhodesian Air Training Scheme. Although limited in size, this scheme was negotiated with supreme speed and ease in London while the Ottawa negotiations were apparently foundering, leaving the white-settler government in Southern Rhodesia with what was effectively a *carte blanche* from the British Treasury to make sure the negotiated scheme got up and running as quickly as construction allowed. In May 1940, the first training school in Southern Rhodesia opened, before the first Canadian school began training pupils.<sup>9</sup>

These developments were worrisome for South Africa. The Union was apparently the leading example of Western European civilisation in Africa, with aspirations for regional political leadership and perhaps even further territorial acquisitions in the sub-Saharan portion of the continent. Yet its northern neighbour, a mere colony—indeed a colony that had previously refused to join the Union—was leading the British African effort in terms of air training. With a white population of under 50,000 and a propensity to portray itself as something of a proto-Dominion,<sup>10</sup> Southern Rhodesia's success could seriously compromise South Africa's eminent position as the only Dominion to administer the empire's needs in Africa.

Southern Rhodesia's scheme accommodated Rhodesians, Britons, South Africans, Fijians, Greeks and Belgians,<sup>11</sup> and gained even further prominence when Australia agreed to send elementary trained pilots there for advanced training.<sup>12</sup> This effectively, although unofficially, linked the blossoming African scheme to that of the rest of the Commonwealth—the rest of the Commonwealth with the exception of South Africa, that is. Unless action was taken, it was probable that Southern Rhodesia would be the suggested location in Africa for all training of RAF and South African airmen that the Union itself could not accommodate. One Dominion's

Office (DO) report warned of deep resentment in the Union, going on to conclude that the 'Rhodesian proposal cuts South Africa out, South Africa will not like it'.<sup>13</sup>

South Africa soon took steps to get involved in imperial air training. First, Australian pupils who failed to qualify as pilots in Southern Rhodesia were offered air observer training in South Africa with the SAAF, free of charge.<sup>14</sup> Smuts suggested to the UK the possibility of South African air training for men of European descent in the Union, with the possibility of supplying personnel for the RAF shortly afterwards. London enthusiastically received the offer, and plans were made to bring the South African scheme into line with other training plans.<sup>15</sup> Further negotiations led to the Van Ryneveld–Brooke-Popham agreement (often abbreviated to the Van-Popham agreement), signed on 1 June 1940. The terms were almost casual in construction, largely ignoring the issue of expenses.<sup>16</sup> After surveying suitable airfield sites and with the financial negotiations being worked out in increasing detail—South Africa took responsibility for costs relating to the land (construction of aerodromes and the like) and the UK for costs in the air (the provision of training aircraft for instance)—a further agreement was arranged in June 1941.<sup>17</sup> At this time the Union also accepted the transfer of three RAF schools en bloc to South Africa, in which Britons and South Africans would train alongside one another.

The results were initially poor. In January 1941, the UK asked about the progress of the agreed schools, but heard little or nothing back. Having already enquired about progress on 12 September and 24 December 1940, the Air Ministry now warned Pretoria that a four-month notice period was the minimum time expected between receiving information on the new schools' requirements and the delivery of essential equipment.<sup>18</sup> This threat struck a chord with South Africa. In the training agreements, it was noted that limitations on the size of the Union's scheme and the speed of its development would depend on the 'supply of skilled personnel, aircraft and equipment from the United Kingdom'. South Africa's rationale for RAF air training was derived from the benefits that the country would receive, namely in expanding its own air force, developing infrastructure and receiving technical assistance. Because it was constructed as a bilateral Anglo-South African scheme, Pretoria could control and limit the reciprocal flow of South Africans to the RAF: prior to accepting UK pupils or supplying South African airmen for the RAF, Pretoria insisted that 'the requirements in aircrews of ... South Africa Air Force squadrons ... must be met'.<sup>19</sup> The benefits of this scheme over the corresponding benefits of



the BCATP to the other Dominions were stark—the UK was paying in full for South Africans ‘seconded’ to the RAF, while funding the majority of the equipment costs of air training in South Africa.<sup>20</sup> South Africa made further use of its imperial connections after the delay in initiating its programme, gathering reports on the experience and development of other British air training initiatives in countries with limited white populations, to ease the process of building its own scheme.<sup>21</sup>

The UK maintained some power in this relationship through the provision of essential personnel and material, which it recognised that the Union lacked.<sup>22</sup> Initially South Africa found itself competing with Southern Rhodesia for those resources that the UK made available for the African continent, and London informed the Union that it had to wait in line for equipment behind Rhodesian schools, which had been agreed upon earlier.<sup>23</sup> The absence of an aircraft industry was particularly problematic at this stage of the development of the Anglo-South African JATS. It was not until 1942 that a substantial amount of equipment could be diverted to the Union, by which time the initial difficulties in South Africa, such as locating suitable aerodrome sites, had also been solved.

The slow start to the JATS left South Africa lagging behind the other Dominions, with a training output roughly equivalent to Southern Rhodesia’s, by 1942. At the Ottawa Air Training Conference that year, the South African High Commissioner in Ottawa made an impromptu decision to give an opening statement at the inauguration dinner, announcing South Africa’s presence by elaborating on the nature of the Union’s entire war effort, a speech that stood apart in its content from the other delegations’ statements.<sup>24</sup> South Africa was uncomfortably sidelined from Commonwealth negotiations during the conference, reflecting the peculiar position that its separate scheme had created within the wider alliance.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless South Africa’s scheme developed from 1942 with a striking rapidity, and retrospectively the JATS was a genuine success for both the RAF and the SAAF. Table 10.1 indicates this, with a comparison to the BCATP, as well as the Southern Rhodesian and American training schemes.

The slow nature of the scheme’s development is plainly apparent—by September 1941 South Africa had trained fewer than 500 aircrew, while the still accelerating BCATP had surpassed 12,000. In 1941–2, both the African training schemes were unable to match the output of the RAF transferred schools in the USA, but this was also a period of rapid growth for the JATS. By the following year, the Union’s production of airmen almost matched that which was occurring in both the USA and Southern

**Table 10.1** Output of training schemes in the Union of South Africa, the UK, the USA, Southern Rhodesia and the BCATP Dominions

<i>Country of graduation</i>	1939–40	1940–1	1941–2	1942–3	1943–4	1944–5
South Africa	–	446	3,797	6,686	7,945	7,233
Southern Rhodesia	24	856	2,365	2,548	2,450	1,864
USA	–	372	6,806	4,418	2,442	2,012
BCATP Dominions	1,196	12,128	32,209	47,464	50,604	40,526
UK	7,830	17,424	17,870	23,864	20,805	11,437

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), pp. 273–8

Rhodesia combined; and by the end of the war, the JATS had produced 26,107 airmen, substantially more than emerged from Southern Rhodesia. The Union therefore preserved its unique leadership role among the other African parts of the empire.

Furthermore, despite the geographical drawbacks of training RAF aircrews in South Africa, namely the lengthy five-week sea journey to Cape Town, it served a very practical purpose. Aircrews trained in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia were fed directly into the air effort of the Middle East, allowing a greater proportion of those trained in the North Atlantic region to engage with the Luftwaffe in Europe. Additionally, Greek and Yugoslav volunteers were guided to these Allied African training schools, which proved a convenient arrangement both for ease of training location and eventual operational theatre.<sup>26</sup> For the average RAF airmen, the trip to the Cape was usually considered worth the long journey, given the relative comfort in which training took place in the Union.<sup>27</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, as a proportion of the white population, the JATS was twice as large as the commitment that Canada had taken on in air training.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly for the UK this was a significant contribution. In addition to the airmen trained for the RAF, the SAAF fulfilled crucial roles in protecting British merchant shipping on the African coastline and in contributing to the East and North African land theatres. The UK claimed the JATS was ‘a striking example of the spirit of co-operation which brought us successfully through the war’.<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

1. This chapter is derived, in part, from a contribution to an edited volume: I.E. Johnston, ‘Imperial settler-regions in the Second World War: The case of British air training in southern Africa’, in W. Ugolini

- & J. Pattinson (eds), *Fighting for Britain? Negotiating Identities in Britain during the Second World War* (New York, 2015).
2. DO to UK High Commissioner, Pretoria, 26 September 1939, CAB 21/499; Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria, to South African High Commissioner, London, 30 September 1939, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 57, FS1/74, Part I.
  3. Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, to the Accredited Representative of the Union of South Africa, Ottawa, 13 October, 1939, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part II.
  4. Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria, to South African High Commissioner, London, 30 September 1939, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 57, FS1/74, Part I.
  5. Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria, to South African High Commissioner, London, 14 October 1939, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 57, FS1/74, Part I.
  6. South African High Commissioner, London, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, 13 January, 1942, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part II.
  7. Memorandum by Air Commodore Croil, 5 September 1936, RG24, vol. 3214.
  8. Report of the 19th Meeting of the Air Ministry Committee for the BCATP, A1196, 12/501/75.
  9. 'Southern Rhodesia's War Effort', Union Broadcast by Mr W.D. Gale, undated, UWH 262.
  10. 'Southern Rhodesia at War', 15 August 1942, and 'Southern Rhodesia's War Effort', Union Broadcast by Mr W.D. Gale, undated, UWH 262. See also J. Golley, *Aircrew Unlimited: The Commonwealth Air Training Plan* (Sparkford, 1993), p. 35.
  11. 'Southern Rhodesia at War', 15 August 1942, and 'Southern Rhodesia's War Effort', Union Broadcast by Mr W.D. Gale, undated, UWH 262.
  12. EATS: Training in Rhodesia of RAAF Aircrew, A5954, 236/1; and Public Relations Bulletin – Vital Part of EATS; Rhodesia turns out many Australian Airmen, A8681, 1943/2611.
  13. Kennedy to Dawe, 17 January 1940, DO 35/1003/6.
  14. Empire Air Scheme: Flying Training Schools in Rhodesia, A1608, L17/2/2; Papers Concerning the EATS: History (Part 1), A1966/5, 324.
  15. Report of the 22nd Meeting of the Air Ministry Committee for the BCATP, A1196, 12/501/75.

16. Memorandum on the Expansion of Training Facilities in South Africa, 1 June 1940, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I.
17. Joint Air Training Scheme, South Africa: Memorandum of agreements, June 1941, AIR 20/1346.
18. 'Equipment Requirements for Flying Training Schools in South Africa', 7 January, 1941, AIR 2/4551.
19. Memorandum on the Expansion of Training Facilities in South Africa, 1 June 1940, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I.
20. South Africa made a one-off payment of £250,000 to the UK to offset some of the financial imbalance in the scheme. Joint Air Training Scheme, South Africa: Memorandum of agreements, June 1941, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I.
21. 'Extract from Report of the New Zealand Government Air Department for the Year 1939–40', June 1941, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I. See also, Construction of Air Stations – Southern Rhodesia (sub-file), Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I.
22. Memorandum on the Expansion of Training Facilities in South Africa, 1 June 1940, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, vol. 125, DWS1001, Part I.
23. Air Ministry to Brooke-Popham, Pretoria, 17 May 1940, AIR 2/4551.
24. Accredited Representative of the Union of South Africa, Ottawa, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, 3 June 1942, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part II; Speech by South African representative, AIR 2/8181.
25. Memorandum from Baldwin to Cumyn, 19 June, 1942, RG24, vol. 5388. Accredited Representative of the Union of South Africa, Ottawa, to Secretary of External Affairs, Pretoria, 3 June 1942, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part II.
26. Air Ministry, *Second World War, 1939–1945: RAF Flying Training, Policy and Planning* (London, 1952), AIR 10/551, Appendix No. 3, pp. 279–80; Golley, *Aircrew Unlimited*, pp. 41, 67.
27. Golley, *Aircrew Unlimited*, p. 151.
28. *RAF Quarterly*, 16, 2 (1945), p. 85.
29. Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London to Minister of External Affairs, Pretoria, 18 October, 1946, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part I.

## CONCLUSION

The outcome of all British air training, from the USA to the Middle East, from the Commonwealth to the empire, was the production of 326,552 airmen. Of this, the Dominions were responsible for training a staggering 61 per cent in their own territories. Chamberlain's initial appeal had stated that the UK felt that it could accommodate less than half of the training capacity necessary to meet its strategic need—this proved to be the case, a problem that was answered mainly by the Dominions. The air training that took place in the Commonwealth was, however, so much more than just the relocation or creation of training facilities. The Dominions provided an incredible *41 per cent* of the total trained aircrew by nationality, and astonishingly as high a figure as *46 per cent* of the pilots that were finally output.<sup>1</sup> The RAF was not just relying on training taking place abroad; it was drawing almost half of its newly trained manpower from the Dominions. This substantial Dominion contribution demonstrates the strength of the Commonwealth alliance and reveals some of its key features.

The structure of Dominion air forces, modelled on the RAF, was a vital starting point for the training schemes and one that allowed for much more than simply relocating RAF schools abroad, as occurred in other alliances, including the Anglo-American air training arrangement. Training schools located in, and run by, the Dominions relieved the RAF of administrative duties and of providing the total manpower requirements for everything that went with such a momentous training establishment: maintenance, training personnel, construction and infrastructure development, to name only a few. The extent of this should not be underestimated—in Canada alone over 8300 buildings were constructed, 2000 miles of power lines

were placed, and some 35 million square yards of runway were laid.<sup>2</sup> Canada shouldered \$1.6bn of the \$2.2bn cost,<sup>3</sup> with the UK permitted to provide its share largely in kind: namely machines, parts and advisors or staff, where required.<sup>4</sup> All this simply could not have happened if the countries involved had not followed RAF training methods, mainly in RAF-designated machines, in accordance with RAF guidelines.<sup>5</sup> In stark contrast, the Air Ministry complained in 1941 that the small Royal Indian Air Force had ‘carried on re-organisation and formation of Air Force units without keeping the Air Ministry informed’,<sup>6</sup> while the USA refused to consider pooling its airmen with the Commonwealth on the grounds that each nation would ‘do better work if it maintains its own national identity and fights under its own command’.<sup>7</sup> Although the issue of national identity proved troublesome in Anglo-Dominion relations, it was only a persistent difficulty precisely because the Dominions were so willing to operate within the RAF, under British command.

Manpower was an important factor. At several points during the war, the question of finding the required levels of volunteers to keep the scheme growing at the desired pace became a serious problem. On the one hand, this demonstrated the successful nature of the BCATP—it was developed because of a desperate lack of training facilities, yet reached proportions that challenged the supply of manpower in the Commonwealth alliance to fill the vast network that was created. The question was posed on several occasions of utilising the vast manpower reserves of the colony of India, with a population of over 300 million. It was even acknowledged by the Air Ministry that an air training scheme in the colony would be hugely popular in terms of recruitment. Yet India could not provide, at least in any serious number, what the Commonwealth could: white Europeans with sufficient education. Small-scale samples of Indian pupils were accommodated in training schools—18 Indian pilots graduated from Canadian schools and a further 15 from UK schools—but the Air Ministry considered Indian pupils less capable, despite strategic reasons that suggested a training network in India would be desirable.<sup>8</sup> At most the Air Ministry allowed that there was a case for ‘developing elementary facilities in India to train the white manpower that was available’.<sup>9</sup>

Britishness—which, within the Commonwealth, incorporated ‘whiteness’ as an inherent aspect—was perceived as a desirable quality in the Air Ministry: it admitted that, during the war, ‘the main system of recruitment depended as always for its material mainly ... [on] the white population of the Empire’.<sup>10</sup> More so than whiteness, Britishness was understood to give

Dominion airmen a tangible stake in the struggle. As one Air Ministry review of an Indian pilot asserted, by contrast, this airman's 'heart [was] not in the war'.<sup>11</sup> Nor was this policy adopted only by the UK—in one discussion, at the Ottawa Air Training Conference of 1942, when Canada considered accepting Indian pupils to its BCATP schools, Canadian officials admitted that they only agreed to the *principle* because they had been informed that Indians would not actually be sent to North America. Canadian officials pointed to the RAF interwar doctrine, adopted by the RCAF, that aircrew could only be 'of pure European descent', but were informed by the Air Ministry that the RAF had by this time, at least officially, 'cut that out'.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike the colonial empire, the Dominions also had the productive capacity to manufacture aircraft, although this remained somewhat limited. Most notably, Canada was selected as the training hub partly due to the fact that it was the most industrially advanced Dominion, situated beside the vast productive capacity of the USA. This meant that shortages of aircraft, machine tools and spare parts were less likely to stall the output of aircrew at a crucial moment. The UK continued to be the primary supplier of machines, but the margin for catastrophe was significantly lower with the resources available in North America. Australia and New Zealand had a limited potential for aircraft production, although their training schemes stretched this as far as possible, relieving some of the burden on the mother country. The Air Ministry concluded that this industrial capacity provided 'a resilience and independence which was so essential for a widespread system such as the Empire Air Training Scheme'.<sup>13</sup> Finance was also important, given the huge sums that Canada was willing and able to invest in the scheme. Although Australia and New Zealand needed their proposed dollar contribution to be underwritten by the UK, they endeavoured to meet this burden in the first instance.

South Africa was cautious to avoid unduly stretching its citizens' tolerance of the war, and was less willing to divert its own resources into air training, particularly on behalf of the RAF. Lacking an aircraft industry at the outbreak of war, the Union could foresee no large-scale plan of production in the first three years of the conflict. These two issues prevented the Union from cooperating with the wider BCATP and made air training in the Union a slow process to initiate. The Union required assistance from the UK to develop a significant training effort, something that it was willing to do through its own JATS because it could use the larger training scheme, and all the benefits this entailed in British equipment and expenditure, first to meet its own needs, before supplying a closely-monitored

output of airmen for the RAF. The nature of South African airmen's participation in the RAF—as 'seconded' personnel for whom the Air Ministry compensated the Union—also separated South Africa's cooperation with the RAF from that of the other Dominions. National uniforms aside, South Africans were the most anonymously absorbed airmen within the RAF, lacking individual RAF squadrons that the other Dominions and even Southern Rhodesia obtained; however, the quid pro quo was that the Union's emphasis on developing the SAAF gave its own air force the most significant individual Dominion role in air operations, particularly its actions on the African coastline and in East and North Africa.

The geographical reach of the Commonwealth was also an important factor in the success of the air training schemes. Each Dominion was out of reach of significant and sustained enemy air attack, unlike the UK, which made them suitable training locations. Although the Dominions could not recreate European urban environments, which became essential at the OTU stage of training, airmen were, as the OTU name suggested, ready for operation simulations by this stage. Allowing the earlier phases of training to occur elsewhere and grouping operational-capable airmen in the UK, where they would be most useful in an emergency, was a convenient solution to the UK's lack of air space and threat of attack. Although the distance to South Africa and the Pacific Dominions was prohibitive in terms of diverting large training resources from the UK, the varied locations of the Dominions complemented the requirements of a global conflict. Men trained in South Africa largely fought in Africa and the Middle East, men trained in Canada mostly served in Europe, and men from the South Pacific could be utilised in the Asia-Pacific region, or diverted to Africa and North America for advanced training. Whereas imperial overreach is often equated with weakness, the massively diverse geographical spread of the Commonwealth alliance was a useful tool in bolstering the UK's ability to fight globally, because the Dominions were so tightly linked to the RAF in terms of air power.

Phrases such as 'war-winning' and 'decisive' are often offered in relation to the British air training schemes of the Second World War. Air power had developed into a factor that affected virtually every field of combat: convoy protection, coastal patrols, army co-operation, home defence and reconnaissance, to name a few. On 6 September 1940, Churchill announced, 'The Navy can lose us the war, but only the Air Force can win it. Therefore our supreme effort must be to gain overwhelming mastery in the air. The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of vic-



tory.<sup>14</sup> This highlighted the centrality of the bomber offensive to British strategy in the Second World War.

The bomber offensive increased in pace just as the Dominion air training schemes were also accelerating, and the Commonwealth provided almost half of the combat manpower involved. While the direct impact of the offensive on victory continues to be debated,<sup>15</sup> it is apparent that at the very least the diversion of Nazi resources to the home front and the interruption of war production had a significant impact on the German war effort, which affected the course of the war. As early as May 1942, Balfour was able to telegram the British delegation at the Ottawa Conference to say:

These daily offensive operations are keeping many Squadrons of the Luftwaffe in the West and (within a total of some 1,500,000 men employed on ARP duties) hundreds of thousands of Nazi soldiers to man the enemy's searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. We know the enemy has recently had to reinforce considerably his defences round important targets.<sup>16</sup>

The bomber offensive, and the resulting effect on Nazi Germany, expanded in both ambition and impact following this statement. In combination with the other areas in which air power was proving increasingly decisive, it is fair to conclude that the Dominion air training schemes made a direct and significant contribution to Allied victory. The Secretary of State for Air wrote on the conclusion of the war, 'After a long and bitter struggle the Allied Air Forces have won the supremacy of the air and won it decisively.'<sup>17</sup> The Dominions played an indispensable role in this achievement.

## NOTES

1. See [Appendix 2](#).
2. Final Report of the Chief of the Air Staff, 16 April 1945, MG 27 III B II, vol. 39.
3. S. Hayter, 'History of the Creation of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan', Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum, <http://www.airmuseum.ca/bcatp.html>, last accessed 29 April 2011.
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5. Air Ministry, *Second World War, 1939–1945: RAF Flying Training, Policy and Planning* (London, 1952), AIR 10/551, p. 79.
6. ‘The Air Forces in India’, January 1941, AIR 2/8056.
7. S.A. Legation, Washington, to Secretary for External Affairs, Pretoria, 4 June 1942, Department of Foreign Affairs papers, 9/4/2, Part I.
8. ‘Extracts Relating to India’, AIR 2/8056.
9. ‘Extracts Relating to India’, AIR 2/8056.
10. Air Ministry, *RAF Flying Training*, AIR 10/551, p. 65.
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12. ‘Outstanding Points of Yesterday’s Discussion: Colour Bar’, RG24, vol. 5389.
13. Air Ministry, *RAF Flying Training*, AIR 10/551, p. 47.
14. Air Ministry, *RAF Flying Training*, AIR 10/551, p. 121.
15. S. Cox, ‘Setting the Historical Agenda: Webster and Frankland and the Debate over the Strategic Bomber Offensive against Germany, 1939–1945’, in J. Grey (ed.), *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and the British Commonwealth* (Westport, 2003), pp. 161–169; D. Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London, 2011), pp. 283–7; Phillips O’Brien, ‘East vs. West in the Defeat of Nazi Germany’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23, 2 (2000), 89–113; R. Overy, *The Air War, 1939–1945* (London, 1980), pp. 117–123; G.C. Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 169–174; A. Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of Nazi Germany* (London, 2006), pp. 648–650, 671; C.K. Webster and N. Frankland, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939–1945* (London, 1961), pp. 10, 288; G.L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 151, 418–420.
16. Dominions Office, London, to the UK High Commissioner, Ottawa, 18 May 1942, AIR 2/8181.
17. British Secretary State for Air, London, to Minister of National Defence for Air, Ottawa, 26 March, 1945, AIR 2/6945.

# ‘We Are a Maritime Commonwealth’: The Dominions and British Maritime Power, 1939–1945

## INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the Second World War, the UK’s worldwide empire was dependent upon the sea to the greatest extent in its history.<sup>1</sup> Growth in air travel provided an alternative and quicker mode of transport, but global sea lanes were the arteries of the British world system, moving men and bulk trade around the Commonwealth and colonies on an unrivalled scale. The UK had remained the predominant sea power after the Great War, but the interwar period saw this position of primacy challenged. The end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1922 weakened the UK’s position in the Far East, while the naval treaties of 1922 and 1930 limited British freedom in expanding the Royal Navy (RN). The growing naval strength of a number of other powers—the USA, Germany, Italy and Japan—meant that by September 1939, Britannia could no longer claim to rule the waves.

Nevertheless, British war plans were still primarily based upon naval dominance. It did not take long, however, for the shortcomings of a strategy based around the naval blockade of Germany to become apparent in 1939–40, even before the German conquest of continental Europe neutralised its effect; nor did the enemy waste any time in exposing the vulnerability of the Commonwealth’s reliance on its merchant fleet. All combatants faced the problem that the Second World War was a highly mobile conflict, requiring the global movement of fighting forces to an unprecedented degree.<sup>2</sup> Heavily dependent upon imports and sea communications with its allies,<sup>3</sup> however, the UK relied on merchant shipping not only to conduct war but also for the fundamental purpose of

subsistence at home. German Admiral Doenitz, senior submarine officer in, and later head of, the German Navy, noted that 'England was in every respect dependent on sea-borne supply for food and import of raw materials, as well as for development of every type of military power. The single task of the German Navy was, therefore, to interrupt or cut these sea communications.'<sup>4</sup>

While the UK could boast of the largest pool of merchant shipping in the world in 1939, it also had the largest empire to service with seaborne trade, including the Dominions.<sup>5</sup> During the war, conflicting demands acutely strained shipping. Substantial tonnage was required to begin any sizeable offensive, and to maintain supplies for active theatres. Evicted from the European continent, the UK subsequently fought in North Africa and the Middle East, its main land theatres—a steady stream of men, munitions and materiel needed to be transported there from the UK, the Dominions and the British colonies, demanding vast amounts of shipping over long distances. Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa that cost the UK a reduction of around 30 per cent of its imports in 1942 due to diverted shipping,<sup>6</sup> coinciding with the heaviest month of shipping losses for the Allies, was a clear example of just how intimately shipping was tied to active operations.<sup>7</sup> The movement around the Commonwealth of men for the air training schemes, the transportation of munitions from the major supply sources in the UK and North America to allies, and the materiel and personnel requirements of any new theatre that the UK hoped to fight in, all needed to be met from the shipping pool, with enemies all the while attempting to sink as much British tonnage as possible to deplete shipping resources.

In sharing a resource as greatly strained as shipping, the Commonwealth was compelled to work—and suffer—together to meet the challenges that the Axis and global strategy posed. In the North Atlantic, the UK increasingly turned to Canadian assistance to combat the submarine threat. At the Cape of Good Hope, it was left to South Africa to facilitate the flow of supplies to and from the eastern empire, once Italy had severed the line through the Mediterranean to Egypt and beyond. Meanwhile, geography and Japanese belligerency meant that Australia and New Zealand played a less direct role in the UK's maritime effort. Aside from maintenance work, the most valuable contributions that the Pacific Dominions offered to the shipping cause were their flexibility within Allied strategic plans, their increasing cooperation with the USA, and their willingness to accept privations. Nevertheless, because of the Commonwealth's special role and

importance in British strategy, it did not suffer like other parts of the empire due to the shipping shortage; indeed, the Dominions played an essential part in the maintenance of the UK’s seaborne communications network. Having acknowledged the UK’s place at the centre of ‘a maritime Commonwealth’, Churchill claimed that shipping was ‘the ... sole foundation of our war strategy’.<sup>8</sup> The Dominions played a vital role in ensuring its safe and continued passage around the globe.

## NOTES

1. Part III is derived, in part, from the following article: I.E. Johnston, ‘The Dominions and British Maritime Power in World War II’, *Global War Studies*, 11, 1 (2014), 89–120. This article also features as a chapter in the edited collection published by Brécourt Academic, M. Faulkner & A. Patalano (eds), *The Sea and the Second World War*, (2016).
2. R.M. Leighton and R.W. Coakley, *United States Army in World War II: Global Logistics and Strategy 1940–43* (Washington, 1955), p. 6.
3. L. Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London, 2011), p. 105.
4. Division of Naval Intelligence, *The Conduct of War at Sea: An Essay by Admiral Karl Doenitz* (Washington, 1946).
5. C.B.A. Behrens, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: British War Economy Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London, 1955), pp. 2–3; Kennedy puts these figures at 42 per cent in 1914 and 26 per cent in 1938: P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London, 1991), p. 318.
6. Collingham, *Taste of War*, p. 111.
7. Even more so because defeating the Axis in North Africa was partly justified by the fact it would ‘re-open’ the Mediterranean to Allied shipping. ‘S.A. Railways & Harbours Departmental Civil War History, Vol. III: Ports and Shipping’, UWH 23. See also G. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 380.
8. J.R.M. Butler & J.M.A. Gwyer, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy Vol. III, June 1941–August 1942: Part II* (London, 1964), p. 548.

## British Naval Strategy and the War at Sea

To understand the importance of the Dominions to British maritime dominance, it is important to contextualise the Commonwealth contribution within London's wider war plans and the progress of the war at sea. British strategy had long been built around the strength of the Royal Navy (RN). The importance of naval power can be seen in defence expenditure in the interwar years: the Admiralty annually received the majority of British defence funds until 1938.<sup>1</sup> These figures reflected the demands of imperial defence as much as the protection of the British Isles—although each portion of the empire was ostensibly responsible for its local defence, each segment looked to the RN to keep the whole connected. Even though the Dominions of Canada and Australia had opted against contributing to the RN in favour of establishing their own navies and the Union formed its own independent South African Naval Service (SANS), the RN remained the major component of every Dominion's maritime defence. The psychological impact on Australia of the failure of the Singapore strategy in 1942, for instance, displayed how deeply faith in the RN had been held in areas as distant from the UK's home waters as the South Pacific.

Favouring international treaties that facilitated global disarmament and limitations on naval forces over alliances, London developed a one-power standard in the interwar period—effectively a pledge to remain at least as strong as the largest navy in the world. This policy was combined with a strategy to keep that one power, the USA, within naval bounds that

the UK could afford to compete with, while simultaneously keeping the biggest threat—Japanese naval power in the Pacific—at manageable proportions. Restrictions on worldwide naval forces coincided with the lapse of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1922 and were further enshrined through the 1930 London Naval Treaty. If consigning the RN to treaty limits for the first time was a sign that the era of British ‘naval mastery’, to borrow Kennedy’s phrase, had ended, this was not the intention of the architects of these agreements. At the Admiralty, the realisation that treaties could placate rival powers and influence their building programmes favourably, exactly when British naval mastery was the most vulnerable it had been for over a century, meant that naval agreements were used as a method to preserve the UK’s position until it was ready for another all-out naval arms race.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until after the 1930 treaty had lapsed on 31 December 1936 that the RN could join the rearmament trend. Despite the growing threat of Germany and the unclear intentions of Italy and Japan, the British government continued to place its faith in treaties, such as the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935,<sup>3</sup> and in the one-power standard—going against the ambitious plans of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), that recommended the creation of a two-power standard aimed towards Germany and Japan. In any case the British shipbuilding industry, having deteriorated in the interwar period and only just beginning to recover from the deleterious effects of the Great Depression, could not have kept pace with the larger scheme; it was operating at full capacity just meeting the requirements of the one-power standard as war approached. During the interwar period, the expense of warship tonnage rapidly increased, while the building capacity of British yards had been halved by 1935.<sup>4</sup> In the face of growing challenges and threats, these were both limiting factors for naval rearmament.

The fall of France quickly cast doubt on two pre-war naval assumptions: that a blockade could break Germany’s economy, and that the major threat to British merchant shipping would be surface vessels. Instead it was the UK’s economy that faced the challenge of sustaining imports, while German U-boats presented the greatest threat. Furthermore, technological developments made this conflict very different from the Great War. Air power transformed naval warfare in a way few had predicted before the outbreak of hostilities, not least through the effectiveness of direct assaults on battleships and the importance of reconnaissance aircraft in locating enemy vessels. Air power therefore represented both a new danger to the

RN and a new element to be incorporated into British sea power. The importance of the latter factor was demonstrated in the changing pattern of submarine attacks, which moved from Allied coasts to the mid-Atlantic air gap, away from Allied air cover, as aircraft were more successfully employed. Intelligence too became central to the outcome of the shipping war, as dominance in the Atlantic could swing from one adversary to the other through adroit utilisation of Ultra intelligence, as Enigma cipher codes were altered.<sup>5</sup>

Against the threat of submarines, convoys were the UK's answer. Pre-war anti-submarine preparations were underwhelming, due to the belief that Germany would not wage unrestricted submarine warfare for fear of antagonising the USA, as had occurred during the Great War; however, the early loss of a British ship to enemy action was enough to ensure that work towards a considerable convoy system soon began in earnest.<sup>6</sup> The success of the convoy system was fundamental to British survival and Allied victory. Despite suffering a very similar average monthly loss of tonnage in both wars,<sup>7</sup> the number of ships sunk was 41 per month during the Second World War, compared with 95 in the Great War—and in the later war this reduction in losses was achieved largely without assistance from the French naval fleet.<sup>8</sup> Convoys alone were by no means a panacea for the U-Boat threat—in September 1940, for instance, 40 out of 59 sinkings occurred *in* convoys—but they were a vital element in securing the safe passage of shipping across the oceans.<sup>9</sup> Anomalous convoy statistics such as the aforementioned must be understood in light of several factors that converged in that month: German code-breaking of Admiralty messages, improved German technology and naval tactics, weather conditions, bad luck and an increasing percentage of shipping being placed in convoy as opposed to independent sailing. Although these factors could still pose threats to escorted vessels, the effectiveness of convoys began early—only seven of the first 164 ships sunk were in convoy—and remained relatively consistent through the war.<sup>10</sup> Of 5,756 ships that sailed in convoy to the end of 1939, only four were sunk by submarines.<sup>11</sup>

The RN therefore had to meet a mammoth challenge—all waters that were navigable to British merchant vessels were potentially areas where protection would be required.<sup>12</sup> Utilising the convoy system to meet this threat, even in just the most crucial areas, required a large number of escorts, consistently above pre-war assumptions.<sup>13</sup> Even at the outbreak of war, when the optimistically low number of 70 cruisers was presumed necessary, the Admiralty had only around 50 at its disposal—



including those contributed by the Dominions.<sup>14</sup> As the war progressed, commitments for British shipping continued to grow, and requirements for escorts increased concurrently. The RN simply did not possess the capability to meet these demands alone. After charting developments of the war at sea, particularly with regard to the fate of the British merchant shipping that was foundational to imperial strategy, I will place the Dominion effort within the wider context of British strategy and the progress of the naval war, beginning with the Pacific Dominions at the end of this chapter.

The hard fought war of attrition at sea was a testament to the importance placed by the belligerents on naval power as a decisive factor in the conflict. There was no phoney war period for the RN. The Admiralty assumed control of merchant shipping on 26 August 1939 and issued a two-part publication for merchant shipping crews on how to defend their vessels.<sup>15</sup> Convoys, the saviour of shipping in 1917 when German U-boats had first tried to strangle British imports, were initiated with minimal delay after war was declared.<sup>16</sup> As in the Great War, the RN was denied a Trafalgar-style grandstanding victory against the battleships of the smaller German fleet during the conflict, with the major naval work largely falling on the escort services of destroyers and corvettes, as they tried to shepherd seaborne vessels safely to their destinations.

Offensively, a blockade strategy was immediately put into action with French assistance. German imports from the Atlantic were virtually halted in a *déjà vu* scenario from the previous conflict, with the Channel and northern entrances to the North Sea blocked by the RN.<sup>17</sup> The efficacy of the blockade, however, was questionable from the beginning. Not only was Germany not overly reliant on this source of trade, it also had access to raw materials from the Soviet Union, had embarked upon pre-war stockpiling of essential materials and additionally laboured to ensure substitute supplies were in production domestically as part of the quest for autarky.<sup>18</sup> The fall of France compounded the blockade's inadequacy, and Churchill grumbled that 'the blockade is broken, and Hitler has Asia and probably Africa to draw from'.<sup>19</sup>

Instead it was Germany that launched a major offensive that threatened to starve the UK of its crucial imports. German U-boats, 16 of which were ready and waiting in the Atlantic before war was declared, were the core around which a wider German offensive—of air attacks, mines, cruisers disguised as merchant vessels and surface raiders—against British merchant tonnage was based. In the very early days of war, before U-boats

established a wide operational extent, the two German pocket battleships that accompanied U-boats to the Atlantic appeared to pose the greatest threat to British shipping. The pocket battleships and disguised cruisers operated in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, while U-boats largely operated off British coasts and sank several hundred thousand tons of British shipping, but offered little more than ‘pinpricks’ to British strategic plans given their small numbers.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, shipping, measured both by the number of vessels and by the tonnage of these vessels (the latter figure providing an indication of the size, and therefore the ships’ crucial carrying capacity), was not easily replaced, and therefore any loss resulted in a limitation of the UK’s strategic options. In the period from 3 September 1939 to May 1940, two hundred merchant ships were sunk, totalling 790,817 tons;<sup>21</sup> twenty-three U-boats were destroyed in the process.<sup>22</sup>

Called into action when Germany invaded Norway in April 1940, the RN suffered some difficult losses against the Luftwaffe before the UK retreated from Norwegian territory. Worse, the naval balance transformed when Germany overran the Low Countries and France in May and June: France had brought to the Allied war effort a strength of one aircraft carrier, five battleships and battle-cruisers, 75 destroyers and 59 submarines, which were now at best neutral; Italy entered on the Axis side with six battleships, 61 destroyers, seven heavy and 12 light cruisers, and an alarming 105 submarines to supplement the German U-boat effort.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the Italian fleet was placed in the centre of the Mediterranean, severing the critically important imperial communications line that ran through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. The route around the Cape of Good Hope and the position of South Africa suddenly became crucial as the safest imperial link from the UK to the eastern empire, including the South Pacific.

With Italy exerting a stranglehold over the Mediterranean, Germany simultaneously used its new bases in the Bay of Biscay to substantially increase the range of its U-boat campaign. Compounding these fresh difficulties for the UK was the additional need to concentrate large naval forces in home waters to ward off an invasion: the Wehrmacht had reached the Channel during the invasion of France, a move which also robbed merchant shipping of crucial escort vessels. After Germany’s rampant early successes, and bolstered by Italian entry into the war, Hitler declared a total blockade of the British Isles on 17 August 1940. Despite the RN engaging German vessels whenever the opportunity arose, the Axis held the initiative.<sup>24</sup>

Although not yet at its numerical peak, the U-boat threat during the winter of 1940–1 reached the highest level of the war in relation to British shipping capacity. At this time, Germany was sinking British shipping much more quickly than vessels could be replaced.<sup>25</sup> It was largely convoy work that prevented the losses from becoming catastrophic. From June 1940 to mid-March 1941, 423 merchant ships were sunk by Germany, at the cost of only 45 U-boats. This reduced Allied shipping by over two million tons. The majority of these vessels were lost northwest of Ireland, still within the range of British air cover. At this time, British merchant shipping was sunk off the west coast of Africa as well, hinting at the extended range of the German U-boat offensive.

Victory in the Battle of Britain greatly reduced Germany's ability to invade the UK. In the summer of 1941, Operation Barbarossa, the German assault on the Soviet Union, heralded a new phase of the war. An enormous portion of Germany's military exertion moved eastwards. Nevertheless, because of both its failure to invade the UK and the substantial demands on air and ground forces in the east, Germany placed renewed emphasis on its primary naval goal of defeating the UK through starving the British Isles of vital supplies. Throughout 1941, the convoys and U-boats continued their struggle, largely in the North Atlantic.

From mid-March 1941 to 31 December 1941, 340 merchant ships were sunk, totalling 1,656,108 tons; Germany lost 49 U-boats in the process. Sinkings of Allied merchant shipping were now occurring across a much larger range: there was a flurry of losses incurred in the proximity of Freetown, off the coast of West Africa, as increasing levels of British shipping embarked on the Cape Route; in North American waters, the first sustained losses occurred in the area under Canadian air cover; the waters to the north-west of the UK remained a troubled zone, despite British air cover; the eastern Mediterranean saw losses for the Allies and Axis alike; and the mid-Atlantic air gap, between land-based air support supplied by the UK and from North America, was exposed for the first time. Sinkings in the air gap formed the northern tip of a line of losses that stretched as far south as Namibia, encompassing the Spanish coastline, the western entrance to the Mediterranean and the west coast of Africa. The toll on imports into the UK was also increasingly apparent—they fell to 26 million tons in 1941, compared to over 68 million tons before the war.<sup>26</sup> This affected living standards in the UK and the ability to produce and receive armaments for waging war.

December 1941 precipitated the official entry of the USA into the war on the Allied side, but Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was also the prelude to a humiliating string of military defeats for the UK in Asia, bringing with it further shipping losses and stretching the thinly-spread Commonwealth naval resources even further. Replacements for lost sources of supply needed to be found, and shipping was rerouted once more to deal with these strategic predicaments—increased use of the Panama Canal to supply Australia and New Zealand, for instance, was now initiated, bringing the Caribbean into enemy focus. The multiplying problems of shipping defence were also crucial to any offensive plans the Allies hoped to make: the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty noted, as late as January 1943, that 'the shipping shortage will, and does indeed already restrict our whole offensive strategy'.<sup>27</sup>

Although Japan largely viewed submarines as auxiliary to its battle fleets, rather than as independent weapons to be used in a large-scale battle against merchant shipping,<sup>28</sup> Germany's response to its new American enemy was an unrestricted U-boat campaign against shipping in North American waters. Substantial losses were sustained east of the USA, as Washington, apparently not heeding British lessons from two world wars, was excessively hesitant to organise a coastal convoy response to the U-boat offensive. The UK suffered heavy shipping losses off the USA's coastline, while trying to secure North American supplies. At the same time, London was also trying to meet the additional challenge of supplying the Soviet Union via Arctic convoys. This was on top of increasingly diverting shipping on the route around the Cape of Good Hope to supply its fighting forces in North Africa and to maintain the movement of war stores around its eastern empire.

In the period of January to July 1942, over 3.5 million tons, some 678 ships, were sunk by U-Boats. The overwhelming majority of these attacks were in clusters on the east coast of the USA and in the Caribbean. Canadian waters were also hit harder at this time than during any previous phase of the war at sea, because German U-boat commanders were freed from the political shackles—the fear of antagonising the USA—that had previously denied them the opportunity for assaults on shipping west of Newfoundland. In this area, they now found offensive opportunities against tightly packed convoys, immediately after these merchant ships departed Canada.<sup>29</sup> Minor Allied losses occurred in the Indian Ocean area at this time, off the coasts of India, Ceylon, South Africa and Mozambique, as the extent of the Axis operations widened; however, in the Atlantic

waters within air cover from the UK, there were now fewer merchant ships sunk than at any previous phase of the war. Other losses were sustained in the Arctic area and continued on a small scale in the Mediterranean. Only 50 U-boats were sunk in response to these heavy Allied casualties.

In August 1942, having been driven away by the initiation and strengthening of coastal convoys around the USA and the subsequent loss of easy merchant ship targets, U-boats resumed their direct challenge to the North Atlantic convoy route in the mid-ocean area. Due to the loss of European allies and important Pacific territories,<sup>30</sup> the UK depended more than ever on North American supplies, just as production in North America was expanding rapidly. If the seaborne links could be sustained, the North Atlantic was undoubtedly becoming the highway from production to battlefield that could provide the basis for an Allied victory in Europe. Under the infamous 600-mile mid-Atlantic air gap south of Greenland, between the crucial coverage that long-range aircraft from the British Isles and North America could provide, U-boat commanders found a potential area in which submarines could stifle the rate of supplies arriving in the UK. Germany now devoted around 50 per cent of its U-boat strength to this crucial struggle in the North Atlantic, while the other areas—the Indian Ocean, South Atlantic, Caribbean and Arctic—remained peripheral zones of attrition.<sup>31</sup>

The winter of 1942–3 was particularly harsh in the North Atlantic. Adverse weather conditions caused shipping losses and proved persistently difficult for the successful movement of convoys; the elements also hampered German U-boats from pursuing their strategy at a time when Germany was reading British communications signals, which assisted offensive capabilities, and increasing its operational U-boat numbers. November was the worst month for Allied merchant tonnage sunk in the war and during the subsequent three months, losses continued to be sustained by Allied vessels at a dangerously high level. Operation Torch, in November 1942, required a significant diversion of naval vessels, weakening the position in the North Atlantic; the North African landings also caused a six-month delay in the introduction of the long-proposed Allied escort support groups: naval task forces that included aircraft carriers, designed to close the mid-ocean air gap.<sup>32</sup> These factors combined to make March 1943 a genuine crisis month for the Allies in the Battle of the Atlantic—yet despite the U-boat effort appearing to reach a crescendo in the first weeks, it fell away in the last ten days of the month.<sup>33</sup>

In the phase from August 1942 to May 1943, 790 Allied ships were sunk; this amounted to almost 4.5 million tons of shipping. Nevertheless, U-boat losses began to mount seriously at the same time: 166 U-boats were sunk in this period. This was the climactic and decisive moment in the war at sea. Allied losses in the North Atlantic were overwhelmingly inflicted in the mid-Atlantic air gap and at the operational periphery of land-based North American and British air cover. Significant losses also occurred in the Caribbean and off the north-east coast of South America. Sinkings continued in the eastern Mediterranean, but during this phase, the western regions of the Mediterranean, where the Torch landings and further Allied reinforcements arrived via shipping to North Africa, were the scene of the most sustained losses. More shipping was sunk in a shipping lane from Freetown to Brazil; along the South African coast and further around the east African coastline as far as Mozambique and Tanzania; in the Indian Ocean near Ceylon and India; and on the Arctic convoy route as well. The Axis submarine threat was striking in its global reach.

But by May 1943, the Allies had won the Battle of the Atlantic. At the start of May, the Axis powers maintained 120 U-boats at sea; by the end of the month this number was down to 85. U-boats suffered an average loss of around one vessel per day for the entire month, an unsustainable rate to continue significant operations.<sup>34</sup> A number of factors combined to produce this Allied victory at sea. German communication codes were cracked again, while Germany lost its own ability to read important British transmissions; escort support groups were increasingly introduced to the theatre from March, with improving effectiveness; convoy escorts, particularly destroyers and corvettes, continued to increase in numbers and technological advancement; and finally, radar-equipped long-range aircraft operated in increasing numbers from the UK, and, most importantly at this time, from North America. Technology, intelligence, tactics and the sheer force of numbers all combined to ensure the crucial North Atlantic link was not broken by the U-boat threat. The three-month period from June to August 1943 highlights this success—81 Allied ships, less than half a million tons, were sunk. While inflicting these losses, the Axis lost 116 U-boats. The depletion of U-boats was disproportionately high in the North Atlantic, where they failed to sink a single Allied ship in this period. Those that did occur for the Allies were mainly off the east coast of South America, in the Mediterranean and in the waters around south-east Africa.

The war at sea nevertheless continued, although on a much reduced scale. During 1942–3, the Axis' disguised auxiliary cruisers were hunted down—the last was destroyed in October 1943. From September 1943 to April 1944, U-boats achieved several small successes in the North Atlantic, but the South Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean were their most deadly hunting grounds. Nevertheless Axis campaigns in these theatres could not offset a trend that prevailed from the summer of 1943 until the defeat of Germany, namely that U-boats were sunk at a comparable rate to merchant ships, making the whole effort unprofitable. U-boat operations were once more reduced to a series of pinpricks against Allied strategy, and no longer threatened to be a decisive campaign. Allied merchant ships sunk in this phase amounted to 130 vessels (760,094 tons); the Axis lost 136 U-boats in the same period.

Late in the war, Germany tried unsuccessfully to resurrect the U-boat campaign, planning to isolate Allied armies on continental Europe from their supply chain across the Channel following the Normandy landings. New technology—the submarine snorkel—aided a small-scale re-emergence of German U-boats in the North Atlantic. Shipping construction levels and convoy security measures were such by this stage, however, that there was scant opportunity for this effort to halt or even significantly slow supplies feeding the Allied march across Western Europe.

Although Germany was on the brink of introducing a new advanced model of U-boat, which had the operational capabilities to once more threaten the strengthened convoys, by the time it reached the production stage the Allied bombing campaign was sufficient to undermine the construction process. Any plans for operational success of this new submarine were destroyed because Luftwaffe support, axiomatic for the success of these vessels, was unavailable due to the Allied air assaults on Germany. Not a single Allied ship was lost to these new U-boats.<sup>35</sup> From May 1944 to May 1945, the majority of Allied ships sunk were attacked off the coast of the UK once more—a few sinkings persisted in peripheral areas, from the Indian Ocean to North America, but not on a significant level. In this final phase, 121 U-boats were sunk against a loss of 123 Allied ships, a little over 500,000 tons, but the shipping war was won unequivocally.

An indispensable factor for victory in the war at sea was American production of merchant vessels. By February 1943, when merchant shipbuilding first exceeded shipping sunk by U-boats, American shipyards were producing the bulk of Allied merchant vessels.<sup>36</sup> By the autumn of that year, Allied production was faster than the rate of losses to all causes.

Shipping was still in short supply given the numerous global commitments for which it was needed, and the British War Cabinet remained concerned about the rate of supplies to the UK. Victory in the North Atlantic and the new unprecedented levels of shipping production, however, facilitated a shift in London's strategic thinking: consideration turned to the best allocation of shipping for victory, no longer simply to avoid defeat. Nevertheless it was not until 1944, when the UK was assured of sufficient access to American vessels, that the import situation was ensured. While the British Commonwealth turned out an average of around two million tons of merchant shipping annually throughout the war, a total of about 12 million tons, the USA produced over 55 million tons during the war years.<sup>37</sup> In *merchant ship production*, the USA underwrote Allied victory.

This account of the war at sea demonstrates the importance of protecting and maintaining merchant shipping to the Allies, because shipping was the major limiting factor to waging global warfare, and it was consistently under threat of attack from the Axis powers. The major crises for shipping were the winter of 1940–1, during which sinkings outstripped Commonwealth merchant shipbuilding and replacements could only be purchased from the fledgling American production, using scarce British dollar reserves;<sup>38</sup> and during the winter of 1942–3, when American shipbuilding was rapidly accelerating but still some distance from its peak, and Allied shipping was experiencing severe losses. It was only after this latter crisis that shipping became more freely available to the Allies, although it remained the most significant limitation for strategy, because it was foundational for so many aspects of the war effort. Despite eventually prevailing, the UK lost almost 30 per cent of the merchant ships available in September 1939, and in terms of tonnage, the losses exceeded 50 per cent.<sup>39</sup> To understand the role that the Dominions fulfilled in ensuring that the British Empire did not lose the war at sea, especially in the crucial crisis years of 1940 to 1943, we must first look at the development of Dominion naval power in the twentieth century and the state of Dominion naval forces at the outbreak of war.

The Dominions provided significant assistance in British victory at sea: in 1939, however, Dominion naval power was unpromising. Although the Dominions maintained separate navies,<sup>40</sup> the entire Commonwealth was united by its reliance on the RN to provide true naval security. South Africa and New Zealand were incapable of producing major vessels, while even Australia and Canada, each with their own royal navies, had relatively limited shipbuilding capacities, which required the stimulus of wartime



expenditure to facilitate an effective contribution. Furthermore, training methods, institutional structures and vessels came from the RN or local derivations of RN models, so that the naval forces of the Dominions were operationally little more than additions to the RN itself. The relationship was so seamless that interwar naval treaties designed to limit RN expansion also applied to Dominion navies—other naval powers perceived the Dominion forces as local extensions of the RN.

In practice this largely proved to be the case. New Zealand's naval forces maintained this subsidiary status officially until October 1941; the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) did not take long to fall entirely under Admiralty control once war began;<sup>41</sup> South Africa's forces, *except* for its Admiralty-run Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR SA),<sup>42</sup> were negligible; and Canada, ever the ostensibly independent Dominion under Canadian Prime Minister King, nevertheless instructed Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) forces to cooperate with the Admiralty to the fullest, making it a *de facto* extension of the RN.<sup>43</sup> The Admiralty therefore exerted significant control over the direction of the naval forces of the entire Commonwealth. How great was this addition to RN strength? Table 11.1 demonstrates the relatively small addition that the Dominion navies made to British naval personnel on the outbreak of war.

The combined Dominion personnel numbers of 16,564, of which the RAN alone made up almost two-thirds, were dwarfed by the UK's figure of almost 190,000. As a total Commonwealth force of just over 200,000, the Dominion element of naval personnel constituted only a little over 8 per cent. Furthermore, Table 11.2 shows that these few men were responsible for manning an equally small number of ships.

The RAN once more made up more than half of the available Dominion forces, yet even this number was completely overshadowed by the strength

**Table 11.1** Strength of the Royal Navy and Dominion navies at the outbreak of war—personnel numbers

<i>Navy</i>	<i>RN</i>	<i>RCN</i>	<i>RAN</i>	<i>RNZN</i>	<i>SANS</i>
Permanent force	118,932 <sup>a</sup>	1,990	5,440	1,339	6
Reserves	69,754	1,700	4,819	670	600
Total	188,686	3,690	10,259	2,009	606

<sup>a</sup>Includes Dominion personnel serving with the Royal Navy

Source: Roskill (1960), p. 449

**Table 11.2** Strength of the Royal Navy and Dominion navies at the outbreak of war—naval vessels

<i>Navy</i>	<i>RN</i>	<i>RCN</i>	<i>RAN</i>	<i>RNZN</i>	<i>SANS</i>
Cruisers	58	–	6	2	–
Destroyers	173	6	5	–	–
Sloops, escort and patrol vessels	45	–	2	2	–
Capital ships	15	–	–	–	–
Aircraft carriers	7	–	–	–	–

*Source:* Roskill (1960), p. 449

of the RN. At the other end of the scale, the SANS, comprising just six men (three officers and three ratings)<sup>44</sup> and having retired its final two vessels of the interwar period, was effectively a non-entity.<sup>45</sup> The operational strength of the RN was therefore not enhanced to any great degree by the Dominion forces as they existed in September 1939. Nevertheless the small increment gained even at this stage was of elevated importance given that the Admiralty was faced with shortages in almost every area, particularly in escort vessels. While the RN could not rely on a great deal of assistance from the Dominions upon the outbreak of war, the small size and nature of the Dominion forces also meant that they were incapable of pursuing independent strategies and were therefore inclined to fall in line with Admiralty direction.<sup>46</sup>

In the manning of merchant shipping vessels, the UK was also central. Although Canada recognised that ‘the provision of merchant seamen, their training, care and protection’ was ‘essential to the proper conduct of war’, the UK was nevertheless still providing some 40 per cent of the officers and engineers in Canada’s merchant fleet in November 1943.<sup>47</sup> This provision of skilled seamen for the Dominions was an important service that the UK was able to provide even under the strain of wartime conditions, a burden of hegemony that was necessarily undertaken to buttress the contribution of the junior partners in the alliance. This paralleled the UK’s provision of ground crew for Dominion air forces (discussed in Part II) and ancillary units for Dominion armies in North Africa (to be discussed in Part IV).

The chief task that the Dominion navies undertook early in the war was escorting convoys. Despite their small numbers, Dominion vessels were largely suited to this task. The Dominions, however, did more than just engage in protecting the movement of merchant shipping—they provided

their own shipping on a larger scale than ever before. While British merchant tonnage in 1939 as a proportion of global supply had dropped relatively compared to 1914, the overall tonnage remained at around 20.5 million gross tons, and the 9,488 ships that this tonnage comprised were dispersed globally on their usual duties when war broke out.<sup>48</sup> The contribution of the Dominions, however, had risen by over 80 per cent since 1914—from just over 1.6 million gross tons to just under 3 million. The main contributors were Australia and,<sup>49</sup> to a greater extent, Canada; South Africa had only 22,000 tons to its name.<sup>50</sup>

Australia and Canada continued to build merchant shipping during the war, although the latter to a much more significant extent than the former. Some 3.6 million tons of shipping emerged from Canadian yards: much less than the UK itself (8.3 million tons), but still comfortably more than the ten ocean-going merchant ships eventually produced in Australia.<sup>51</sup> The Dominions could have provided a more significant effort in this field with London's support, but the production of merchant shipping was stifled by other shipbuilding demands and London's decision to rely on the USA to fill the gap in merchant vessels.<sup>52</sup> American production, however, did not come into full effect until the latter years of the war; the production of Commonwealth tonnage in the Dominions was extremely useful in the interim. Looking ahead to 1942, for instance, the Allies predicted that they would make a net gain of 500,000 tons when comparing newly built ships with losses, while in the same period Canada and Australia were expected to build at least 450,000 tons. This seemingly small amount emerging from the Dominions was therefore vital, because the margins between losses and production were so fine that without it, the Allies could not expect to increase carrying capacity, with all the implications this had for global strategy.<sup>53</sup> Despite being a small expense on the UK's shipping resources as war approached—the estimated 17.7 per cent of British tonnage that was employed in inter-Dominion or Dominion foreign trade was fractionally more than the approximate 15 per cent the Dominions brought to the Commonwealth pool—the Dominions provided a useful and somewhat unexpected addition to Commonwealth merchant ship production during the war.<sup>54</sup> It was in protecting and maintaining rather than providing shipping, however, where the Dominions made their most significant contribution.

The island Dominions of Australia and New Zealand both had a special interest in the protection of shipping. Despite their location far from the early theatres of conflict, they were quickly called upon to provide support

for the UK at sea. Five RAN destroyers joined the RN in the Battle for the Mediterranean, while RAN vessels served as escorts to the troopships transporting Pacific Dominion soldiers to North Africa. The RAN became deeply engaged in Mediterranean operations, involved in everything from supplying Malta, escort duties, fighting the German and Italian fleets and bombarding shore-based enemy positions.

Japan's aggressive attitude, however, caused RAN naval forces to return to the Pacific in late 1941, so that when HMAS *Sydney* was sunk off the coast of Australia by a German cruiser in November 1941, most RAN vessels were in Australia or Singapore.<sup>55</sup> From then on, Australian naval forces would largely feature in the Pacific theatre, for a long period under the overall operational control of the USA. While the RAN was the strongest Dominion navy on the outbreak of war—unsurprising given its unique combination of resources and insecurity—it was superseded during the conflict by the RCN's dramatic growth. Nevertheless the RAN was an impressive size for a country of Australia's means when its strength peaked on 30 June 1945 at 39,650 personnel and 337 vessels.<sup>56</sup>

For New Zealand, the priorities of defence were also initially imperial. As a division of the RN, New Zealand's naval forces were at the disposal of the Admiralty and were additionally involved in protecting Pacific convoys when not called on by the RN. When war arrived, the New Zealand division already had four vessels engaged in war missions, as the navy provided New Zealand's most organised contribution to the early British war effort.<sup>57</sup> The imperial nature of the force was striking in numbers as well as in action: 43 per cent of its ratings were on loan from the RN, while New Zealanders made up less than 7 per cent of the officers.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the imperial obligations of the force, which became officially independent as the Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) on 1 October 1941, it was also in demand closer to home. The German raiders *Orion* and *Komet*, which sunk 17 merchant ships (114,118 tons), mainly in the Pacific, made four of these attacks in New Zealand's waters. The RNZN eventually peaked in strength in July 1945 with 10,649 personnel. In addition to minor craft, the RNZN also possessed 30 vessels, predominantly minesweepers and anti-submarine boats.<sup>59</sup>

Like the RAN, the RNZN in fact operated in the American zone of control for the majority of the war. Once informed by London in June 1940 that a fleet would probably not arrive to reinforce Singapore in the case of Japanese belligerency, the USA became an essential component in Pacific Dominion naval plans. As one New Zealand historian has noted,

‘from 1942 in practice, and from 1940, in anticipation, New Zealand stood or fell with the USA, rather than Britain’.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the imperial element in the Pacific Dominions’ naval efforts persisted throughout the war. An Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) squadron was formed to operate from Suva; Australia, New Zealand and Canada coordinated their efforts in ensuring the safety of air cadets travelling to Vancouver and of some British shipping in the Pacific; and the Pacific Dominions first pressed for, and then contributed men and vessels to, the British Pacific Fleet that was formed in November 1944.<sup>61</sup>

Allied merchant shipping fared well in the Pacific—a relatively small amount of tonnage was lost during the war, although this achievement has been attributed mainly to the success of evasive routing rather than Dominion naval strength.<sup>62</sup> Besides those ships sunk around New Zealand,<sup>63</sup> nine merchant ships were lost due to German mines near Australia by the end of 1941, while Japanese assaults sunk 20 ships in this area during 1942. Disguised merchant raiders also posed a consistent threat to Australia and New Zealand, because the Admiralty refused to inspect neutral tonnage for fear of antagonizing neutrals, particularly in the early phase of war.<sup>64</sup> By late 1943, however, these attacks had declined. The Pacific Dominions nevertheless relied heavily on British merchant vessels due to the necessity of overseas trade, and London controlled the allocation of shipping to the Dominions.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, aside from overseas trade, both Dominions were reliant on their coastal vessels—the vast territory of Australia, for instance, conducted some 85–90 per cent of its interstate trade by this method.<sup>66</sup> Tasman Sea convoys were initiated between the two Pacific Dominions, although an adequate number of escorts was rarely found.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of shipping to the island Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, largely isolated in the South Pacific and so far from the main supply base of the UK.<sup>68</sup> Though historians now consider that tonnage levels were adequate for Australia’s requirements, Canberra was rarely satisfied with what London allocated it.<sup>69</sup> Australian insecurity was born from its Great War experience and early warnings emanating from London about the expected availability of British shipping—even in November 1939, Canberra was told that wheat purchases by the UK from Australia were primarily dependent on the availability of shipping.<sup>70</sup> This prompted attempts to create an Australian-controlled pool of shipping—yet despite building merchant vessels and establishing a Commonwealth Ships Chartering Committee,<sup>71</sup>

eventually responsible for nearly 40 vessels in interstate and international trade, Canberra remained heavily reliant on British and American ships. Overseas shipping vessels entering Australia fell from 1,905 (7,128,404 tons) in 1937–8, to 1,276 (5,174,118 tons) in 1941–2, a fall of almost 28 per cent in terms of tonnage.<sup>72</sup> Merchant shipping shortages were alleviated to some degree by the USA's entry into the war;<sup>73</sup> however, they still persisted as late as 1945, when Australia struggled to maintain adequate supplies for its forces fighting in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA).<sup>74</sup>

New Zealand also felt the shipping strain. With an economy largely dependent on the export of a narrow range of agricultural products and with 97 per cent of its food exports going to the UK before the war, New Zealand depended on shipping as a necessary lifeline. A lack of manufacturing capability in New Zealand made the country reliant on overseas production, and imports made up 40 per cent of all goods in use in the country. Combined with a shortage of funds and the unavailability of many consumer products due to the onset of war, however, the shipping shortage soon caused imports to New Zealand to fall. Measured against the 1937 level, they were at 75 per cent in 1940 and fell further to two-thirds of the 1937 standard in 1941.<sup>75</sup> Shipping tonnage in New Zealand's ports, meanwhile, was down 17 per cent by 1940 from the 1938 level, and continued to fall in the subsequent year.<sup>76</sup> UK imports fell away sharply and New Zealand turned to Canberra for support; however, given Australia's own pressing needs, only limited help could be provided. In many cases, Wellington was forced into immediate action in the hope of preventing the shortage of supplies becoming catastrophic—petrol rationing, not introduced in Australia until October 1940, was implemented from the first week of the war by Wellington.<sup>77</sup> By 1941, domestic manufacturers in New Zealand were providing their country with over 70 per cent of the goods in use, up from 60 per cent before the war began.<sup>78</sup>

From 1942, the arrival of American troops and the initiation of Lend-Lease and Canadian Mutual Aid transformed the picture. In 1943, imports subsequently rose to 21 per cent *above* the 1937 level. That the effects of the USA's entry into the war were not largely felt until the latter half of 1943 was partly due to the general Allied shortage of shipping prior to that time.<sup>79</sup> The expansion of Wellington's port facilities from 1942 provided further relief for the import situation.<sup>80</sup> By 1945, New Zealand was finally considered to be providing repairs of high quality at adequate speed.<sup>81</sup> That this feat took almost the entire duration of the war mirrored the experience of the other Dominions and, as in other cases, reflected

as much the alleviation of the shipping emergency as the expansion of Dominion ports.

The New Zealand naval effort also severely disrupted coastal shipping around the country because vessels were requisitioned by the RNZN. In June 1942, all coastal ships over 350 tons were required to work continuously, and even this measure could not prevent an inadequate supply for the majority of the war. Despite the difficult years before 1942, however, New Zealand avoided what would have been a hugely destructive total disruption of shipping.<sup>82</sup> While New Zealand played its part in this success,<sup>83</sup> this outcome was largely thanks to the ongoing efforts in the North Atlantic and around the Cape Route of Africa, the subject of the following chapters.

## NOTES

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50. Dept. of Economics, University of Natal, *The Port of Durban* (Durban, 1969), p. 22. See also, 'Shipping', undated, UWH 73.
51. H. Duncan Hall, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: North American Supply* (London, 1955), p. 425; S.J. Butlin, *Australia in the War of 1939–45: War Economy, 1939–42* (Canberra, 1955), p. 168.
52. H. Duncan Hall & C.C. Wrigley, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Studies of Overseas Supply* (London, 1956), pp. 483–4; Butlin, *War Economy, 1939–42*, pp. 172, 177.
53. 'The Shipping Situation', CAB 123/86.
54. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, p. 5. 'The Present Shipping Situation', December 1940, CAB 21/1240.
55. 'Australia', Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
56. G. Hermon Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Series Two: Navy, Part II, Royal Australian Navy, 1942–1945* (Canberra, 1968), p. 710.
57. W.D. McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War: Defence Policy, 1919–1939* (Christchurch, 1988), pp. 219, 223.
58. Likewise, hundreds of New Zealanders were serving with the RN. Waters, *RNZN*, p. 480.
59. Like the SANS, the RNZN was built around the task of coastal protection.
60. Given the imperial nature of the Pacific Dominions' contributions even after 1942, however, it might be fairer to say that these

- Dominions stood beside London and Washington, but would fall with the latter. McIntyre, *Defence Policy*, p. 242.
61. J.J. Robb, *The British Pacific Fleet: Experience and Legacy, 1944–50* (Surrey, 2013).
  62. See, for instance, D. Stevens, ‘South-West Pacific Sea Frontiers: Seapower in the Australian context’, in D. Stevens (ed.), *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II* (St. Leonard’s, 1996), p. 93.
  63. McIntyre, *Defence Policy*, p. 245.
  64. Dominions Office (DO) Memorandum, 2 September 1939, and Secretary, Department of Defence, Canberra, to Secretary, Prime Minister’s Department, undated, A1608, B17/2/1.
  65. Butlin, *War Economy, 1939–42*, pp. 143–4.
  66. ‘Australian Coastal Requirements’, 17 October 1942, MT 59/429; see also, Prime Minister’s Visit Abroad 1941: Australian Shipping Position, A5954, 621/3.
  67. War Cabinet Agendum – No 233/1940, A2670, 233/1940.
  68. Menzies to Bruce, 22 March, 1940, A1608, F61/2/2, Part 1.
  69. ‘South African Post-war Merchant Marine’, report by the Canadian High Commissioner, Pretoria, 25 January, 1944, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 3988; Bruce to Menzies, 7 September 1940, A1608, F61/2/2, Part 1. See also, Butlin, *War Economy, 1939–42*, p. 155
  70. Casey to McLeay, 7 November 1939, A1608, F61/2/2, Part 1.
  71. Butlin, *War Economy, 1939–42*, pp. 163, 166; See also, War 1939 Neutral Shipping – Use by Britain during the War, A1608, H61/2/2.
  72. Butlin, *War Economy, 1939–42*, p. 193.
  73. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, see Appendix XL.
  74. ‘Australia’, Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII Oxford Companion to World War II*; Delays to Merchant Shipping, A5954, 517/39.
  75. J.V.T. Baker, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War: The New Zealand People at War: War Economy* (Wellington, 1965), p. 107.
  76. Baker, *War Economy*, p. 117; Merchant ships – Loss of and damage to – General, N1 139, 6/34.
  77. Baker, *War Economy*, p. 117; Governor-General, Wellington, to Ministry of War Transport, London, 3 January 1940, DO 35/1059/1.
  78. Baker, *War Economy*, p. 1123.

79. 'Representations by American Authorities Re Ship-Repairs and Turn Round of Ships', 23 January, 1945, EA1 764, 95/4/11, Part I.
80. HM Ships – Repairs to Ships – At Wellington, N1 92, 6/10/2.
81. 'Extract from a letter to the General Manager, Australia, Royal Packet Navigation Co.', 30 August, 1944, N1 94, 6/10/10A.
82. Such destructive losses were not avoided everywhere. Howard, *Grand Strategy, IV*, p. 293; Collingham, *Taste of War*, pp. 125–6.
83. Butlin, *War Economy*, pp. 402–3.

## North Atlantic Convoys: Canada's Special Role

Thrown into the fight unprepared and suffering through a testing period after the submarine threat emerged in the western Atlantic, the RCN reached a low ebb of heavy losses and redeployment in the winter of 1942–3, before re-emerging as a distinct success in Atlantic operations. Indeed no other Dominion came close to matching the effort at sea that Canada produced. The RCN grew immensely from its humble interwar status and finished the war as a strong force in its own right. In 1935 Sir Maurice Hankey, Chairman of the Committee of Imperial Defence, had considered the Canadian navy to represent the nadir not only of the Canadian military services, but possibly even of all the Dominions;<sup>1</sup> by the end of the war, it was the third largest Allied navy and had made a contribution that was fundamental to Allied victory.<sup>2</sup>

RCN personnel doubled between 1936 and 1939, but it remained a small contingent when war arrived, especially in light of the tasks it was soon to face. During the war, however, an impressive 106,552 personnel enlisted for the service—the force peaked in strength in January 1945, with 92,441 men and women serving.<sup>3</sup> This enlistment, over 53 times the number of personnel available in September 1939, mirrored a staggering growth in vessels. The six-destroyer RCN of 1939 was transformed into a force of 365 vessels. The weight of this vastly enhanced establishment was felt in the brutal Battle of the Atlantic.<sup>4</sup>

The Atlantic theatre was exceptional in its importance to British survival and was the setting for one of the most enduring and fiercely contested battles of the entire war. Key munitions, personnel and exports were sent to North America from the UK; more importantly, North America was an increasingly vital source of munitions and raw materials for the UK, especially as other areas fell under enemy control.<sup>5</sup> The shipping shortage created a bias towards imports that required an absolute minimum of British tonnage, namely manufactured goods—of which North America was also a major producer. Although inter-imperial purchases often meant saving crucial dollars, the loss of shipping capacity involved on such long voyages further encouraged London to draw from North America's resources, which were relatively close at hand.<sup>6</sup> Canada alone sent 70 per cent of the armaments it produced to its allies, mainly the UK.<sup>7</sup> It is little wonder the Chiefs of Staff wrote, 'our life continues so long as we ... do not lose the Battle of the Atlantic'.<sup>8</sup> Table 12.1 shows how increasingly important munitions imports alone from North America were. In 1943 and 1944, the Commonwealth received over a third of its munitions from North America. For the UK, ensuring these imports arrived safely was a priority.

**Table 12.1** Total British Commonwealth supplies of munitions and percentage from each source

	1939 (Sept.–Dec.) and 1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945 (1st half)	Total
Total supplies (\$m)	9,200	13,000	19,900	24,800	24,700	9,300	100,900
Percentage from:	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
United Kingdom	90.7	81.8	72.6	62.4	61.2	66.1	69.5
Canada	2.6	5.2	8.6	8.8	8.9	10.0	7.9
Eastern Group	1.1	1.5	1.9	1.9	1.2	1.7	1.6
Purchase in United States	5.6	9.1	4.7	2.4	1.5	1.2	3.7
United States Lend-Lease	–	2.4	12.2	24.5	27.2	21.0	17.3

Source: Duncan Hall (1955), p. 428

RCN involvement with escort duties began as two of Canada's six destroyers accompanied the same number of RN cruisers in sailing with the first convoy to depart from Halifax on 16 September 1939. With London aware of the large gap in escort vessels available to the Commonwealth and Ottawa equally attuned to the massive role it could play in the Atlantic, the latter quickly took steps to improve RCN strength. Indeed the nature of the RCN's growth became just as important as its extent. As early as February 1940, the Canadian government placed contracts for 64 corvettes—small escort ships that were to form a crucial part in the protection of convoys throughout the war. Eventually Canada built 122 of the vessels.<sup>9</sup> The ships produced domestically, as well as those acquired from abroad displayed Ottawa's commitment to protecting shipping as its primary and most important contribution at sea.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the enthusiastic build-up of strength, however, the RCN encountered numerous difficulties early in the war. With the RN at full capacity, it could provide little assistance to the small Canadian navy that was forced to expand rapidly to meet its daunting new role—a situation that resulted in Canadian crews largely learning on the job. Drawn from civilian occupations and thrown hastily into the fray, they lacked both experience and lengthy training when they were forced to face the established U-boat force.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the growing RCN continued to shoulder as much of the North Atlantic burden as it could, freeing the RN for action elsewhere.

During the winter of 1940–1, the U-boat campaign reached one of the two most critical levels of the war years. Yet although the battle was largely fought off the coasts of the British Isles, potential breathing space for Ottawa to train and develop its force did not materialise. The grievous situation in the east merely exerted more pressure on the RCN to rapidly transform from its inadequate pre-war size to an establishment capable of relieving the RN of as much escort responsibility in the western Atlantic as possible, thus allowing the Admiralty to focus on the most threatened area.

By mid-1941 the growing RCN had taken over all convoy escort duty in Newfoundland's territory. This move coincided with the first real submarine threat in Canadian waters. U-boats were now pushed away from British coasts by a combination of increased convoy protection—in part aided by escort vessels relieved by the RCN—and the diminished possibility of a German invasion of the UK, as well as an increasingly effective system of air protection and anti-submarine work by the RAF.<sup>12</sup> From spring

1941 to the end of the year, U-boats mainly focused on the area under North American air cover and even more determinedly in the mid-Atlantic air gap. This shift, caused by German awareness that British forces were more effective in sinking U-boats when compared to their RCN counterparts, was a bad portent for Canada in 1942.

Indeed the first six months of 1942 were catastrophic for Allied shipping losses, with U-boats enjoying rampant successes on the east coast of the USA and in the Caribbean. Compared to these losses, Canadian forces got off lightly; set against the areas under RN control, they fared very badly. U-boats operating west of Newfoundland near Canadian ports, as well as under Canadian air cover, took a toll on shipping well above that in the eastern Atlantic. The RCN responded by continuing its dramatic expansion to counter the threat—by September 1942 the force had 188 warships and was providing just under half the surface escorts available for the crucial North America to UK route.<sup>13</sup>

This unceasing expansion continued to come at the expense of operational effectiveness, however; Ottawa continually chose to push for adequate escort numbers over a smaller, but better equipped and trained, naval force—mainly because the latter would not have had the capacity to cope with escorting the quantity of vessels that the UK desperately needed to travel east.<sup>14</sup> It was an unenviable choice. In November and December 1942, the toll such a massive task was exacting on the over-extended and under-prepared RCN became apparent, as Admiralty assessments showed that four out of every five merchant ships sunk in convoy during those two months were being escorted by the RCN.<sup>15</sup> These statistics were due to much more than Canadian inefficiency: the RN zones under RAF air cover had the most experienced and effective anti-submarine defences, necessitated by the dismal UK performance early in the war, and the USA had only relatively recently forced the U-boats back from its coasts in the wake of its own harsh experiences early in 1942.

Canada was now bearing the brunt of the U-boat offensive and feeling the consequences, an experience that the UK and USA had already suffered.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the scale of the disaster prompted action, especially when, in November 1942, 712,000 tons of merchant shipping was lost.<sup>17</sup> In light of these setbacks, it was agreed that the RCN should take responsibility for the less dangerous Gibraltar escort route, to gain experience and confidence without the intense pressure it was facing on the North Atlantic routes.

This decision, however, did not solve the problem in the North Atlantic. Losses were lower in January and February 1943, but remained at an unacceptable rate.<sup>18</sup> The RN's failure to resolve the issues its RCN partners had faced in the mid-Atlantic area highlighted that even the more efficient and trained force could do little except reduce the gravity of the situation in this area. However, a combination of better air-support,<sup>19</sup> technological advancements in weapons and location equipment, as well as successes by the intelligence services allowed the Allies to turn the battle around in the final days of March 1943. In this same month, it was decided that the RCN should return to taking sole responsibility for convoy duty in the newly formed North-West Atlantic Command. With a new confidence and operational capability, the RCN quickly established dominance in the area.

Yet losses had been such under RN control during the first days of the month that March 1943 was in fact the worst month *for convoys* in the war—68 per cent of tonnage lost was being escorted.<sup>20</sup> Factors such as adverse weather and the small proportion of non-escorted ships helped to create this unfortunate statistic; nevertheless, because the RN itself oversaw such substantial losses, it became evident that the RCN was not the consistent factor in convoy casualties in the western and mid-Atlantic areas. Instead, there were clearly deeper problems in the anti-submarine war. It was no coincidence that when these issues were addressed—such as broken British codes and inadequate air cover in the mid-ocean area—the Allies enjoyed an effective three months (June to August 1943) against the U-boats in the North Atlantic, and merchant losses were reduced and displaced to other theatres. It took time for Commonwealth forces to meet the technological challenges of this new war, but the successful and widespread application of air power in the shipping war became increasingly decisive. Similarly the breaking of the new Enigma key employed by the German Navy, from which subsequent Ultra intelligence provided the foundation for a steady rise in operational successes, was a critical element in this turnaround in the spring of 1943. The RCN, returning to the North Atlantic routes, played a large part in these accomplishments at sea.

The Canadian experience was therefore not straightforward or easy, yet the rapid expansion and increasing effectiveness of the tiny RCN force led to its eventual dominance in the north-west Atlantic theatre. For a considerable period in 1943 and 1944, over 80 per cent of North Atlantic convoy escort duties were the responsibility of the RCN.<sup>21</sup> In fact, two-thirds of submarine sinkings by the RCN came after March 1943, showing



how difficult the early war experience had been—but also the great level of strength the RCN achieved.<sup>22</sup> In 1944, the RCN took sole responsibility for mid-ocean escorts and, despite some losses, this area became a zone where U-boats were sunk faster than merchant vessels for the duration of the war. From April to September 1944, which included the critical Normandy invasion period, all trade convoys between North America and the UK were under RCN protection.<sup>23</sup>

The Axis offensive against Allied shipping presented a very real threat to British survival. While the winter of 1940–1 was the closest the Axis came to critically blockading the UK, the cost of the offensive continued to have a real impact on what the Allies could hope to achieve operationally as shipping and escorts were a consistent limiting factor in global strategy. Of all shipping losses, 64 per cent occurred in the Atlantic, and the UK bore the brunt of the Axis' global effort—shouldering 54 per cent of Allied and neutral shipping losses. The U-boat threat was the gravest, as they alone accounted for 69 per cent of losses, sinking some 2,765 vessels.<sup>24</sup> In this frightening environment, the value of convoys was extremely apparent: 85,775 ships sailed in 2,889 trade convoys to and from the UK; 654 were sunk, the rate of loss being roughly 0.7 per cent.<sup>25</sup>

In the Atlantic, 75,000 ships sailed in 2,200 convoys during the war. The RCN was responsible for escorting over one-third of this total—since shipping resources were so strained and the UK desperately relied on North American imports, this was a massive contribution. While some notable achievements—such as single-handedly escorting a 187-ship convoy in the summer of 1944 (the largest collective to make the journey during the war) without losing a single ship—prove great examples of the successes that the RCN enjoyed, the fundamental statistic is that Canada escorted 25,343 ships to the UK.<sup>26</sup> Without RCN assistance, the RN could only have escorted these vessels and their essential cargoes at the expense of crucial offensive strategy elsewhere. Put simply, Canada played an intrinsic part in the UK's capacity to survive and fight—this was Canada's irreplaceable role in the war at sea.<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

1. 'Impressions of Canadian Defence Policy', December 1934, CAB 63/81. For a breakdown of Dominion naval expenditure in relation to external trade, see Figures for Naval Appreciation, undated, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3988.

2. In numerical strength, although this was a highly specialised naval force largely comprised of escort vessels.
3. J.L. Granatstein, 'Canada', in Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
4. Essential reading in this area includes M. Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto, 1985); and M. Milner, *The U-boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive against Germany's Submarines, 1943–1945* (Annapolis, 1994).
5. J. Hurstfield, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: The Control of Raw Materials* (London, 1953), pp. 160, 161, 164.
6. J. Hurstfield, *Raw Materials*, p. 153. Merchant Shipping: Organisation of Essential Commodities, Part II, A1608, F61/2/2, Part 2.
7. H. Duncan Hall & C.C. Wrigley, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Studies of Overseas Supply* (London, 1956), p. 46; A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006), p. 63.
8. J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy Vol. II, September 1939–June 1941* (London, 1957), p. 579.
9. W.A.B. Douglas et al., *Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, Volume II, Part I: No Higher Purpose* (Ontario, 2002), p. 81; See also, 29 January 1940, LAC, Diaries of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, MG26-J13.
10. Jackson, *British Empire*, p. 63.
11. Granatstein, 'Canada', Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*. This was also the case with South African forces on the Cape Route: L.C. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming, & J.E. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939–45* (Cape Town, 1961), p. 203.
12. Division of Naval Intelligence, *Conduct of War at Sea*.
13. Jackson, *British Empire*, p. 69.
14. W.A.B. Douglas et al., *Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, Volume II, Part II: A Blue Water Navy* (Ontario, 2007), pp. 55–6; M. Milner, 'The Implications of Technological Backwardness: The Royal Canadian Navy, 1939–1945', *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 19 (1989), 46–52.
15. Granatstein, 'Canada', Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.

16. Douglas, *No Higher Purpose*, p. 89.
17. 'Battle of the Atlantic', ADM 1/19387.
18. M. Howard, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy, Vol. IV: August 1942–September 1943* (London, 1972), pp. 632–6.
19. Jackson, *British Empire*, p. 69.
20. Indeed March 1943 marked the lowest level of dry-cargo merchant shipping in the Commonwealth pool during the war, at 18,449,000 tons. C.B.A. Behrens, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: British War Economy Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London, 1955), Appendix VIII.
21. Douglas et al., *Blue Water Navy*, p. 23.
22. Granatstein, 'Canada', Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
23. Statement by Hon. Douglas Abbott, 12 July 1945, DO 35/1207.
24. 'Battle of the Atlantic', ADM 1/19387.
25. S.W. Roskill, *The Navy at War 1939–1945* (London, 1960), p. 451.
26. Statement by Hon. Douglas Abbott, 12 July 1945, DO 35/1207.
27. W.A.B. Douglas et al., *No Higher Purpose*, p. 27.

## Shipping on the Cape Route: South Africa's Unexpected Triumph

Because the Battle of the Atlantic threatened the UK's very survival, it quite understandably has a special and often comprehensive place in the history books of the Second World War. The global nature of the war, however, meant that the effects of one theatre often rippled through many others. The Cape Route, so important once British shipping could not safely sail through the Mediterranean, was an example of an area remote from, but crucially intertwined with, many other theatres. Following Italian entry into the war in June 1940, the Cape Route swiftly became a focus for Axis attacks: it linked the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean; it was the quickest route to the North African and Middle East land theatres in which the UK was conducting most of its fighting; and it had become the primary link between the whole empire east of South Africa and the mother country. With American ships also increasingly rounding the Cape of Good Hope from 1942, the resources of British ports around Africa were tested to an unprecedented degree.

In the early phase of war in particular, the UK looked to its African and Asian colonies as well as the southern Dominions for numerous supplies. The southern Dominions and India offered a useful—though limited—contribution of munitions; however, the raw materials and food resources that they provided were of especially great importance to the UK. Following the near closure of the Mediterranean, London increasingly pursued two solutions to this strategic obstacle—firstly by looking

for replacement supplies from North America and secondly by sending increasing numbers of ships in convoys around the Cape of Good Hope. Immediately a plethora of facilities were required in the British ports on African coasts, but in June 1940, they were either inadequate or plainly non-existent.<sup>1</sup>

South Africa formed the hub of the Cape Route—the point where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Indian Ocean. While it was not the only area suddenly inundated with shipping,<sup>2</sup> South Africa *was* the only Dominion along the whole route, and it was also home to a significant RN naval base at Simon's Town. Among the deluge of ships it was now to accommodate were those of the Winston's Special (WS) convoys.<sup>3</sup> The first sailing of this series of convoys came towards the end of June 1940 and was followed by convoys travelling on average once a month, carrying vital supplies and troops, first for the Suez military base but later for the Far East and India as well. In addition to the movement of military supplies, inter-imperial trade and the transfer of raw materials around the empire were now largely conducted along this route.

Shipping on the Cape Route needed to be as expeditious as possible for several reasons. The two- to three-month journey around the Cape to Egypt already placed the Commonwealth at a significant disadvantage against the Axis, whose supplies for their North African forces were making the much shorter journey from Italian ports directly across the Mediterranean. Furthermore, shipping tied to this route—especially when it was delayed or sunk for whatever reason—was a disproportionately large drain on the whole shipping pool, since the journeys involved were so much longer and planning was required further in advance.<sup>4</sup> Resources were so strained by the extra burden of travelling the Cape Route that in November 1941, no British ships could be found to transport 20,000 troops to the Far East, making painfully evident the strategic implications of a lack of shipping.<sup>5</sup> Compounding these problems was the inevitable need to accommodate the RN escort vessels that accompanied the heavy flow of convoys.<sup>6</sup>

The South African experience with shipping proved to be a microcosm of the Commonwealth's as a whole. As with most areas in the war at sea, submarines provided a central threat to shipping in South African waters. Unexpectedly, however, the Axis was initially of relatively little hindrance in this area.<sup>7</sup> For the Axis, assaulting shipping on the Cape Route was somewhat unprofitable, given the distance and travelling time involved, problems with refuelling, the abundance of still-exposed shipping north

of the equator and the lack of adequate submarine numbers even for the Atlantic.<sup>8</sup> For the Union and the UK, this was extremely fortunate, as the virtually non-existent South African Naval Service (SANS) was in no position to deal with a serious challenge early in the war, while the RN was immediately spread thin by the global requirements of the conflict.

As time progressed, however, South Africa steadily improved its forces.<sup>9</sup> Without a single vessel at the beginning of September 1939, by the end of the year the SANS had 15 ships in service, all whalers and trawlers converted into minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels. In January 1940, a new Seaward Defence Force (SDF) was created under a retired RN officer (Rear Admiral G.W. Hallifax), and became responsible for the Union's naval defence. Although the Union Government intended this force to comprise 51 vessels, it could only provide 21 (all minesweepers and anti-submarine vessels) and it had to draw over 50 per cent of their manpower from the RNVR (SA).<sup>10</sup> Having once depended upon the RN and the fledgling SAAF to adopt the role of protecting South Africa's coast alongside its land-based coastal defences, the Union now increasingly took responsibility for its own coastline.<sup>11</sup> The close cooperation between Commonwealth forces—of the SDF, the SAAF and the RN—was a key feature in protecting shipping on the Cape Route.

Early Union operations were mainly limited to minesweeping in the coastal waters of the Union. Despite South Africa's considerable success in this role, the freedom of movement of the German raider *Atlantis* between the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic displayed the weakness of South African and RN presence on the Cape. Nevertheless Union naval strength continued to develop. In December 1940, the Admiralty was able to request four of the SDF's minesweeping vessels for the Mediterranean. Another nine were subsequently sent, some not returning to the Union's waters until December 1945. The Union's token pre-war naval force, of half a dozen men, expanded to the size of 1,643 men and 50 ships by September 1941.<sup>12</sup> Growing from strength to strength, the SDF and RNVR (SA) merged in August 1942 to form the South African Naval Force (SANF). The Union was now largely taking care of protecting its own coastal waters. The SANF acquired its first major warships in 1944, being allocated three Loch class anti-submarine frigates from the Admiralty.<sup>13</sup>

Like the other Dominion forces, South Africans regularly served in the RN (mainly RNVR (SA) volunteers) as well as alongside British forces in theatres outside South Africa. To maintain an individual identity, South Africans kept distinctive orange shoulder badges on their uniforms, and

Union vessels flew the country's flag. The 'Africa Oath' created complications because it bound UDF personnel to serve only within the confines of the African continent, in the name of regional security. In the case of the minesweepers sent to the Mediterranean, this issue was bypassed by basing all South African forces at the naval base at Alexandria.<sup>14</sup> Problems of national identity and national command that arose for the Dominions in the other armed services—for aircrew in the RAF and ground forces cooperating in Commonwealth armies in North Africa—were not present for naval forces. In part, this was because the number of Dominion personnel serving directly with the RN was relatively small, compared to the numbers of aircrew within the RAF or the manpower in Dominion combat units under British command in armies. Although Dominion ships often served alongside RN vessels and under overall British command, each ship was a self-contained Dominion unit, displaying a Dominion flag, capable of independent decision and action, even if removed from higher strategic direction.

Nevertheless, the establishment of an independent navy was an important step for each Dominion. The creation of the SANF came just in time for the most challenging phase of the war in proximity of the Cape, between August 1942 and May 1943. The main threats to South Africa's coastal waters were U-boats and mines. For the latter, South Africa developed something of a speciality in dealing with the threat. The former, however, posed a much greater menace. German tactics outside the main Atlantic theatre involved moving small 'wolf-packs', often numbering around six U-boats, to peripheral theatres for short periods of time. This allowed U-boats to catch weaker convoys or unprotected shipping until reinforcements were sent, at which point the U-boats were relocated to a newly exposed area. Despite longstanding predictions of an assault around the Cape, U-boats successfully sunk 24 ships in two months after they arrived in South African waters in October 1942, totalling 161,000 tons and including three troopships of a WS convoy.<sup>15</sup> U-boats returned in February 1943 and again found some easy short-term targets, before they were forced to move on once more. Altogether U-boats sunk 130 ships in South African waters, totalling almost 736,000 tons, and a single Allied warship. Only three Axis submarines were sunk by British Commonwealth forces in this area during the war.<sup>16</sup>

The Union therefore achieved mixed results—strong and successful minesweeping efforts alongside a chequered record against U-boats. However, the fact that U-boats failed to wage a sustained campaign in

Union waters, combined with the relatively small loss of tonnage when compared to the vast movement of ships through its waters, testified to the significant defences the Union developed in a relatively short period of time alongside the RN.<sup>17</sup> The biggest shipping challenge for the Union, therefore, was not the protection of convoys that had already arrived in the company of RN vessels, or indeed the anti-submarine and anti-minesweeping tasks that the SANF and SAAF performed with significant effectiveness in combination with the RN. In fact, the most intractable and persistent difficulties experienced by the Union came in the ostensibly basic area of providing supply and repair facilities for the vast tonnage of exhausted Allied shipping. Following the fall of France and the diversion of Allied shipping away from the Mediterranean, these vessels looked to the African Dominion as a haven on their lengthy Cape Route journeys, yet the Union's facilities often fell short of the task designated to them. Furthermore, South Africa was plagued by many of the same issues that every member of the Commonwealth shared, most notably in the rate at which over-worked tonnage could be repaired. Only Freetown, the single British port of notable size on the west coast of Africa, experienced comparable problems—but this was without the added expectations of Dominion status.

Although the UK optimistically predicted only 70 ships would be diverted via South Africa, and suggested the actual number might be smaller,<sup>18</sup> Union ports were soon dealing with a level of tonnage never expected to be passing through them. By tonnage, vessels anchoring in Durban alone rose from under 11m tons in 1939–40 to almost 15m tons in 1942–3.<sup>19</sup> South African docks needed to be efficient enough to allow the quick turnaround of ships carrying—and sometimes loading and unloading—large cargoes and crews, ships that simultaneously required supplies such as coal and water.<sup>20</sup> The requirements of these ships were increased following Japanese expansion in Asia during 1941–2, which cost the Allies important naval bases, with all their facilities, in Hong Kong and Singapore. Furthermore, repairs required for this shipping placed a constant drain on both the space available at docks and, when not conducted at an adequate speed, on the shipping pool itself. There were no easy solutions to the backlogs created.

The extent of repairs required was deemed entirely unprecedented, even measured against the standards of the Great War.<sup>21</sup> The problem loomed large in London and the Union alike: during the critical winter of 1940–1, it was estimated in January that almost 13 per cent of British



shipping was unavailable pending repairs;<sup>22</sup> at one point, it appeared that the Union was dealing with a situation in which over 60 per cent of ships that docked in its ports required repairs of some nature.<sup>23</sup> That ships leaving the Union were headed either into the Atlantic or Indian Ocean, both areas consistently threatened by Axis submarines, only exacerbated the need to ensure they were adequately maintained while docked in South Africa. The whole situation reflected one consequence of the strain that war placed on shipping, because merchant tonnage was constantly employed when not awaiting repairs or transferring cargo and subsequently suffered the effects of this continual use. The value of quality maintenance was also confirmed—‘maritime casualties’, including the loss of worn-out or inadequately repaired ships, took their own considerable toll on British shipping.<sup>24</sup> The problem was aggravated by the age of much of the tonnage. Ships originally released by the non-belligerent USA for the Allies to purchase, for instance, were all at least 20 years old.<sup>25</sup>

Yet the South African provision of services appeared to be failing to meet the demands required of it. At the ports, repairs were not taking place with enough speed,<sup>26</sup> while behind the front line the Union lacked sufficient railway capacity to move goods to and from the harbours with adequate haste to alleviate cargo congestion.<sup>27</sup> As Behrens has argued, the Union had ‘not enough dry-docks, not enough skilled labour, not enough railway wagons; not enough, indeed, of most of the necessary facilities and provisions, and as the shortages increased so did the sources of confusion’. The tailbacks this caused, including frequently around 40 ships at a time just waiting to dock outside Union harbours, were calculated to cost the UK alone roughly 500,000 tons of imports a year.<sup>28</sup> Neither was confusion the only issue—the British mission sent from the UK to help the Union deal with these persistent problems noted that, ‘nobody visiting South Africa for the first time from the United Kingdom ... can fail to be struck with the general absence of that sense of “urgency” so dominant at home’.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Union established more facilities for queuing ships, for instance converting Saldanha Bay into a dock for ships waiting outside Cape Town, the real issue was the slow progress of maintenance work.<sup>30</sup> The Union’s Controller of Ship Repairs made an official ‘appeal to the good sense and patriotism of all labour employed on ship repairs’ to cut out the widespread ‘unnecessary delays’ and ‘undesirable practices’, implied as laziness and slowness, that were contributing to the crisis in South African ports.<sup>31</sup> Others suggested racial policies had created an ‘under-nourished’

class of non-white labourers, that could subsequently only work at 25 per cent the rate of European workers in efficient shipbuilding countries.<sup>32</sup>

The effects of these difficulties were reciprocal. With at one time as many as 78 ships idle in or outside Union ports,<sup>33</sup> inevitably the rate of imports to South Africa from the mother country fell. Although the Union enjoyed a privileged place in terms of receiving British exports, sent to South Africa to earn gold in the first 18 months of war, the volume had already decreased considerably to 40,000 tons a month by 1941.<sup>34</sup> With the escalation of port congestion, it fell further to a paltry 5,000 tons a month in the spring of 1942,<sup>35</sup> leaving a backlog of over 500,000 tons of supplies in the UK, waiting to be loaded on ships to the Union.<sup>36</sup> American deliveries, which had been at a rate of 12–15 ships a month, were completely suspended in April 1942.<sup>37</sup> Washington demanded that the UK instruct Pretoria to place fewer orders in the USA, because unmoved Union cargo—100,000 tons by July 1942—was causing further congestion in American ports as it waited for collection.<sup>38</sup> That deliveries from the UK and USA often contained the necessary materials to improve infrastructure and efficiency in ports only further exacerbated problems. The situation was not relieved until Churchill's decision in early 1943 to cut shipping travelling to the Indian Ocean area by 60 per cent, and finally by the subsequent reopening of the Mediterranean to British shipping in mid-1943.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the number of ships docking in the Union's ports fell from over 11,000 in 1940–1, to just 5,228 in 1943–4.<sup>40</sup>

The Union, like Canada, was therefore a Dominion wholly unprepared for the drastic nature of the task that British strategy demanded of it, especially when Axis advances forced the UK to rely on the periphery of the empire.<sup>41</sup> Yet, despite having virtually no interwar ship repair industry, the Union emerged to provide a service that, just as Canada was facilitating the survival of the UK, kept the link between western and eastern empire open at a time when this bond was essential to imperial armies and, indeed, to London's entire war strategy. Despite the criticism the Union's effort has received,<sup>42</sup> it is difficult to see how South Africa could have fully accommodated such a magnitude of shipping arriving into its limited docking space, especially since at times over half of it required repairs in addition to the usual provisions expected at port.

The fall of France dramatically changed the whole conduct of the war at sea. A completely seamless response to this situation in South Africa would have required initiatives (alongside large investment) *before the war began* in order to have made a significant impact in 1942 when the problems

were most serious.<sup>43</sup> Aside from such a development being largely unwarranted prior to the crisis of June 1940, the UK was justifiably reticent when dealing with requests for financial assistance to expand Union harbour defences in the 1930s. With prevailing political conditions in South Africa equally unlikely to facilitate Pretoria spending large sums on anything that even hinted at imperial-minded expansion, funding presented a major stumbling block. Furthermore, even when action was taken, such as at the key port of Durban,<sup>44</sup> the results were not significant until after the war had concluded, due to the time required for construction and the wartime scarcity of skilled labour and building materials.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, even if expansion had been set in motion when France fell, it is questionable whether additional facilities would have been available in time to deal with the most difficult period for the Union's ports, not to mention the detrimental effect dock construction work might have had in the interim on already stretched resources.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, problems with the speed of repair and turnover of ships were not exclusively South African—they were prevalent throughout the Commonwealth.<sup>47</sup> In the UK, merchant ship repairs were a constant preoccupation in the early years of the war, and new initiatives were sought and implemented to extract maximum efficiency from British dock workers.<sup>48</sup> Even New Zealand, always relied upon to provide the utmost effort for the mother country, found that its inadequate provision at ports attracted London's criticism. The message from the metropole, that the 'Ministry of Shipping wish everything possible to be done to ensure prompt despatch and would welcome any reasonable scheme to improve waterfront conditions in New Zealand which are now notorious for inefficiency and expense', brought home these problems to Wellington.<sup>49</sup> Canada and Australia similarly failed to escape the inherent problems of dealing with a merchant fleet ravaged by attacks and overuse.<sup>50</sup> Where the most extensive repair facilities were eventually created, in Canada, the question eventually arose over what to do with these resources that so far exceeded peacetime requirements and were created through large capital expenditure, when the war ended.<sup>51</sup>

In light of this, criticism of South Africa's effort must be tempered. Drastic action from Pretoria regarding ports could hardly have been expected before the fall of France; on the other hand, the Union was certainly slow to deal with the new circumstances that emerged and took only limited action as a crisis developed in its ports. Indeed, it was not until the British mission arrived that measures were taken to rectify

the most fundamental structural issues that hampered the Union's efforts.<sup>52</sup> Although Smuts authorised complete cooperation with British representatives and the actions subsequently recommended were often implemented, there was the usual quid pro quo in London's dealings with Pretoria. The price that the UK paid to have its suggestions implemented was financial: London agreed to share the costs of the infrastructural development of the Union's harbours during the war to ensure immediate steps were taken to solve the problems, but the Union retained complete control over these facilities when the war concluded.<sup>53</sup>

Despite exploiting its strategic importance for financial gain, the Union's attitude should not obscure the level of its achievements. From having just 150 workers undertaking shipping repairs in September 1939, the Union increased its workforce 20-fold to over 3,000 by the second half of 1942.<sup>54</sup> Several factors made this feat all the more impressive: there was a critical lack of workmen experienced with marine repairs in the Union;<sup>55</sup> the majority of artisans in South Africa were male and from the English-speaking population, which was the same demographic volunteering most consistently for the war;<sup>56</sup> and the usual source of technical assistance, the UK, could provide only limited help given the dire situation in UK ports.<sup>57</sup> In light of these problems, this was a Herculean effort. Even more impressively, Union shipyards repaired *over 13,000* ships during the war.<sup>58</sup> That the entire British merchant fleet, the largest in the world in 1939, numbered less than 10,000 vessels demonstrates the magnitude of this achievement. This included 6,511 ships in the critical period of March 1941 to March 1943 alone.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the Union's ports serviced some 400 convoys, carrying *six million* troops.<sup>60</sup> South Africa truly was a Commonwealth shipping hub, and the effort produced was foundational to British strategy. It was therefore no exaggeration when the British mission reported that shipping services formed the most valuable involvement the Union could have in the war, with repairs in particular deemed to be 'the greatest single contribution which South Africa can make to the Allied war effort'.<sup>61</sup>

## NOTES

1. R.M. Leighton and R.W. Coakley, *United States Army in World War II: Global Logistics and Strategy 1940–43* (Washington, 1955), p. 16.
2. For instance, Freetown was the first African port visited by most convoys on the Cape Route.

3. Named after Winston S. Churchill. In the 12 months beginning August 1941 the UK sent 279 ships carrying over 590,000 personnel via South Africa in WS convoys. C.B.A. Behrens, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: British War Economy Merchant Shipping and the Demands of War* (London, 1955), Appendix XXXV.
4. S.W. Roskill, *Merchant Fleet in War: Alfred Holt & Co. 1939–1945* (London, 1962), pp. 250–1.
5. ‘UK’, Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
6. S.W. Roskill, *The Navy at War 1939–1945* (London, 1960), p. 33.
7. Roskill, *Merchant Fleet*, p. 137.
8. L.C. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming, & J.E. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939–45* (Cape Town, 1961), pp. 97–8.
9. J.C. Goosen, *South Africa’s Navy: The First Fifty Years*, (Cape Town, 1973), p. 83.
10. ‘South African Naval Force’, Department of Defence papers, vol. 1470, F6/522, Part I.
11. A. Wessels ‘The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF) September 1939 to September 1941’, *Military History Journal*, 11, 5 (2000), 165–172.
12. Consisting of 15 anti-submarine and 35 minesweeping vessels.
13. Goosen, *South Africa’s Navy*, pp. 47–50.
14. Goosen, *South Africa’s Navy*, p. 52.
15. Roskill, *Navy at War*, p. 227.
16. ‘Long – Naval History’, UWH 340.
17. Losses to submarines around the Union represented about 5 per cent of global losses to this threat. Turner et al., *Southern Oceans*, pp. 254–5.
18. South African High Commissioner, London, to Prime Minister’s Secretary, Pretoria, 17 May 1940, High Commissioner, London, papers, vol. 66, 116/52, Part I.
19. Turner et al., *Southern Oceans*, pp. 258–9.
20. ‘Ports and Shipping’, undated, UWH 24.
21. ‘Brief for Shipbuilding’, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 3988, p. 57.
22. J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy Vol. II, September 1939–June 1941* (London, 1957), pp. 398, 238.
23. ‘Shipping on the Cape Route: Report to the Minister of War Transport’, 16 December 1942, CO 852/475/4. ‘Shipping’,

- undated, Yearbook – Section XI – Shipping, including Ship Repairs, UWH 73.
24. G. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 370.
  25. Clark to Heeney, 'Re: The Canadian Shipping Board', 15 May 1940, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3988.
  26. Although this was a problem that plagued the entire Commonwealth, South Africa further struggled because it relied on imports for almost all of its industrial machinery. H. Duncan Hall & C.C. Wrigley, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: Studies of Overseas Supply* (London, 1956), p. 423.
  27. 'Memorandum on Ship Repair Organisation', 20 October 1947, UWH, 24. 'War Time Transport', UWH 16. See also, Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, p. 226.
  28. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, pp. 259–260. Congestion also existed in other Commonwealth ports, for Australia, see Capital Ship Dock, Sydney – Priority. Report on Ship Repair Facilities, A5954, 508/3.
  29. 'Shipping on the Cape Route: Report to the Minister of War Transport', 16 December 1942, CO 852/475/4.
  30. 'Ports and Shipping', undated, UWH 24.
  31. 'An Appeal to Labour by the Controller of Ship Repairs: Ship Repair Work at South African Ports', UWH 24.
  32. 'South Africa's Achievements in War-time Ship Repairs', 6 November, 1944, UWH, 25.
  33. 'Shipping', undated, UWH, 73. See also, Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, p. 260; Goosen, *South Africa's Navy*, p. 93; Turner et al., *Southern Oceans*, p. 96.
  34. 'The Wartime Shipping Problem', 1952, UWH 16.
  35. Meeting of 3 July, 1942, Treasury papers, vol. 641, F3/212, Part I.
  36. 'The Wartime Shipping Problem', 1952, UWH 16.
  37. Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, p. 298.
  38. B.M.S.M. to MWT, 6 October 1943, UWH 73.
  39. Nevertheless the repair of merchant ships remained an issue for the Union. 'Re. Ship Repairs: Report for Weekend 22nd April, 1944', vol. 215, COM1/37SC2, Part II.
  40. 'S.A. Railways & Harbours Departmental Civil War History, Vol. III: Ports and Shipping', UWH 23.
  41. 'Shipping on the Cape Route: Report to the Minister of War Transport', 16 December 1942, CO 852/475/4.

42. For opposing viewpoints, see Behrens, *Merchant Shipping*, p. 260; University of Natal, *Port of Durban*, p. 24. *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa*, No. 29 (1958). See also Turner et al., *Southern Oceans*, p. 188.
43. 'Ports and Shipping', undated, UWH 24.
44. Sometimes referred to as the Port of Natal.
45. Other Dominions, such as New Zealand, suffered similar problems in wartime expansion of facilities. Dept. of Economics, University of Natal, *The Port of Durban* (Durban, 1969), pp. 28–9, 36; S.D. Waters, *The Royal New Zealand Navy* (Wellington, 1956), p. 12.
46. This was a quandary other Dominions also faced. For New Zealand, see 'Ship Building and Repairs Committee: Minutes of Meeting', 11 July, 1941, N1 142, 6/35/4.
47. Howe to Robertson, 24 May 1941, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3988. For New Zealand, see Evans to the Naval Secretary, 11 February 1942, N1 408, 13/28/51, Part I.
48. Measures to expedite ship repairs in the UK were frequently near the top of the agenda for the Battle of the Atlantic sub-committee of the War Cabinet. Battle of the Atlantic Committee, CAB 86/1. See also Battle of the Atlantic: Double-shift Working on Repair of Merchant Ships, CAB 21/1499; and Battle of the Atlantic: Shipping, CAB 120/409.
49. J.V.T. Baker, *The New Zealand People at War: War Economy* (Wellington, 1965), p. 395. See also, HM Ships – Repairs to Ships – At Wellington, N1 92, 6/10/2.
50. For Australia, see Duncan Hall & Wrigley, *Overseas Supply*, p. 484; for Canada, see 'Turn Round of Shipping: Memorandum by the Prime Minister', 18 March, 1941, CAB 120/409; W.A.B. Douglas et al., *Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, Volume II, Part II: A Blue Water Navy* (Ontario, 2007), pp. 47–8; Wartime Requirements Board – Naval and Shipping Problems, W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3988.
51. 'Brief for Shipbuilding, publication by the Canadian Shipbuilding and Ship Repairing Association', W.C. Clark's departmental papers, vol. 3988.
52. 'Shipping on the Cape Route: Report to the Minister of War Transport', 16 December 1942, CO 852/475/4.
53. Indeed, Keynes described the Admiralty's contribution to improving South African ports as 'outrageous'. See Keynes to Eady,

- 5 October 1945, D. Moggridge (ed.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 24: Activities 1944–1946: The Transition to Peace* (London, 1979), pp. 532. ‘Ports and Shipping’, undated, UWH 24.
54. ‘Memorandum on Ship Repair Organisation’, 20 October 1947, UWH 24. By way of comparison Canada *began* the war with 4,000 workers, and eventually employed some 75,000 at its peak. Even here, however, there were problems with a shortage of skilled labour. ‘Order-in-Council quoted in “Canadian Merchant Seamen” Report’, 10 October 1944, W.C. Clark’s departmental papers, vol. 3988; for New Zealand lacking staff for repairs at Wellington, see HM Ships – Repairs to Ships – At Wellington, N1, 92, 6/10/2.
55. Controller of Industrial Manpower – Non-Europeans in War Industries, vol. 266, COM 1/65, Part I.
56. *Daily Mail*, 29 September 1942, UWH 292, BI 39; ‘Pool of Artisan Volunteers to Perform Urgent War Work’, Johannesburg Town Clerk to the Controller of Industrial Man Power, 18 July 1941, vol. 221, COM1/37SC3, Part I.
57. ‘South Africa’s Achievements in War-time Ship Repairs’, 6 November 1944, UWH 25.
58. I. Phimister, ‘South Africa, Union of’, Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
59. ‘Ports and Shipping’, undated, UWH, 24.
60. Phimister, ‘South Africa, Union of’, Dear & Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion to WWII*.
61. ‘Shipping on the Cape Route: Report to the Minister of War Transport’, 16 December 1942, CO 852/475/4.



## CONCLUSION

Mahan prefaced his seminal work on sea power by stating that ‘it is easy to say ... the use ... of the sea is and has been a great factor in the history of the world; it is more troublesome to seek out and show its exact bearing at a particular juncture.’<sup>1</sup> The maintenance of the shipping lanes during the Second World War and the eventual overwhelming dominance of the Allies at sea was one of these junctures. The hard fought war of attrition on the oceans was a testament to the importance placed on the sea as a decisive factor in the war by all belligerents.

Shipping was the foundation upon which the Commonwealth, and its war effort, was based. The UK was an island at the heart of a global empire: to draw upon large-scale imperial support, the safe passage of a tremendous number of vessels had to be assured; to disperse its own strength of armaments and manpower to theatres distant from home required that same safety. Under the mounting pressures of the war, the finite shipping resources of the Commonwealth suffered in particular from the loss of the seaborne support and dock facilities of conquered European allies, the near closure of the Mediterranean to Allied merchant shipping, and the advancement of the Axis’ submarine numbers, tactics and technology. Even when the USA entered the war and fought beside the British Empire, the support it provided depended upon shipments travelling across vast oceans.

The Commonwealth’s role proved to be essential in preventing defeat in the shipping war. Ironically, the island Dominions of Australia and New Zealand had the smallest part to play. Largely dependent upon London

for shipping, often reluctantly in Australia's case, the Pacific Dominions worked to ensure the efficiency of their ports, the safety of their waters and furthermore offered navies that proved useful adjuncts to British and American naval power. Vessels from Australia and New Zealand, and their naval personnel, gave the Pacific Dominions a global presence in the war at sea; however, wartime developments meant that the other two belligerent Dominions assumed the more crucial roles in merchant shipping.

The importance of South Africa's shipping contribution was a somewhat surprising development. Its geographical location on the Cape of Good Hope had always been the strategic basis for RN interest in the area,<sup>2</sup> but the Suez Canal had long since superseded the Cape as the primary passageway to the east. The loss of safe Mediterranean sea lanes subjected South Africa's resources to a level of shipping that overwhelmed its existing facilities; until the Mediterranean was once more secured, South Africa struggled to deal with these shipping demands. Yet if the Union could not find the answers to the crisis levels of British tonnage seeking both a Dominion haven on the Cape Route and the facilities of its ports, neither did the imperial supply system break down at this pressure point.<sup>3</sup> Repairs proceeded as fast as the Union could handle them, despite the lack of any considerable Allied support in materials or advisors for long periods; the British Empire maintained its link from east to west; and the necessary provisions despatched from the USA, Canada and the UK to the forces in North Africa and the Middle East continued to flow. Although this involved financial provision from the UK, which London had previously refused to provide prior to the war emergency, the benefits of this investment were crucial to overall strategy.

If South Africa was central to maintaining imperial unity and keeping the British ground forces supported in their primary land theatres, Canada played an essential part in keeping the UK in the war. North American imports and military support proved increasingly essential to British victory, and Canada's assistance in the North Atlantic ensured this flow of men and materiel was maintained. From the first convoy that departed Halifax in 1939, the RCN defended merchant vessels as they made the perilous journey across the Atlantic to such an extent that it quickly became a fundamental element in assuring Allied survival, and ultimately victory. Given the RCN's narrow responsibilities, compared to the global range of the RN's role, Roberts' recent claim that the 'Royal Canadian Navy ... contributed almost as much to victory as the Royal Navy' overstates the case. Nevertheless, although the RCN was a highly specialised force, the

specific role it played was undeniably an irreplaceable part in sustaining the UK's capacity to wage war.<sup>4</sup>

On the outbreak of war, the Dominions were largely reliant on the UK for merchant shipping and lacked significant naval forces. By the war's conclusion, they had all developed substantial power at sea and, rather than carving out individual roles, had taken on the tasks that Allied strategy and Axis successes forced upon their relatively limited resources. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that these naval roles have often been easily incorporated into the all-encompassing 'British effort'. Closer examination shows, however, that in the war at sea, British strategy, survival and victory would have been impossible without the junior partners in the Commonwealth alliance.

#### NOTES

1. A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1805* (London, 1890), p. iii.
2. Mahan, *Sea Power*, p. 28; L.C. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming, & J.E. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939–45* (Cape Town, 1961), p. 1. See also, 'Sub-Sahara Africa: Strategic Issues of the 1970s', 30 September 1969, DFA, 9/69, vol. 3.
3. R.M. Leighton and R.W. Coakley, *United States Army in World War II: Global Logistics and Strategy 1940–43* (Washington, 1955), p. 49.
4. A. Roberts, *Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London, 2010), p. 367.

## ‘Marched and Fought with the Desert Army’: The Dominions in North Africa, 1940–1942

### INTRODUCTION

The war in the desert raged for more than two years. During that time infantry and armour clashed across barren plateaus, with a seemingly indefensible southern flank<sup>1</sup>; fortresses defiantly withstood sieges and fell to opposing armies; rival navies struggled to control the Mediterranean and offer their land forces logistical hegemony; and air forces contested bitter dogfights for the right to support bold offensives or cover hasty retreats. Italy suffered heavy defeats at the hands of British imperial forces; Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s Italo-German army inflicted and suffered reverses against the same enemy; and finally British general Bernard Montgomery and the Eighth Army earned an enduring place in British and Commonwealth history at the expense of the Axis at Alamein.

Fighting in North Africa, essential for maintaining the British imperial position in the Middle East, was central to London’s war strategy. Unquestionably this theatre was of a different magnitude and intensity to that of the Eastern Front; the Soviet contribution effectively formed the preponderant land complement to Anglo-American sea and air power in eroding German strength and securing eventual Allied victory. Yet from London’s perspective, directing the imperial desert war effort in the years 1940–2, the Mediterranean theatre was fundamental to eventual triumph. Victory would secure the route through the Mediterranean, allowing the metropole its quickest access to the colonies and Dominions east of Suez, thereby saving time and reducing the burden on shipping.<sup>2</sup> The British position in Egypt was also a gateway to the Middle East’s oilfields, vital

both to maintain in Allied hands and to deprive from the Axis economies. And just as important—for Churchill most of all—North Africa was where the British Empire was still fighting the Axis on land.<sup>3</sup> Successive European defeats had pushed imperial forces off the continent, and while Allied naval and air forces maintained the struggle at sea and in the skies, it was in North Africa that imperial ground strength could be consistently brought to bear against the Italo-German forces. Churchill forcefully argued against his own Chiefs of Staff for the reversal of defence priorities that had previously privileged Singapore over Egypt,<sup>4</sup> writing that he 'did not believe that anything that might happen in Malaya could amount to a fifth part of the loss of Egypt, the Suez Canal, and the Middle East. I would not tolerate the idea of abandoning the struggle for Egypt.'<sup>5</sup> The prime minister considered that defeat in Egypt ranked second only to a successful German invasion of the British Isles in scale of disaster for the UK.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, if the exact importance of the desert war to overall Allied victory is still debated, especially given the peripheral role and resources that Hitler ascribed to it until a very late stage,<sup>7</sup> its importance to the British world loomed large.<sup>8</sup> It was, in many ways, central to the British war effort. Victory in the desert would not bring about a Nazi collapse; but defeat in the desert could seriously compromise British hopes of triumph.<sup>9</sup> Success in North Africa was perceived as the first step towards eventually winning the entire conflict. Furthermore victory in the desert war was a major political issue in the UK by the autumn of 1942, because the series of military defeats for two years under Churchill's leadership threatened to undermine his position. Churchill depended on victory in the decisive actions of October–November 1942 in the North African theatre, and feared that he 'was done for' if they failed.<sup>10</sup> The result of the desert war therefore had a profound impact on the course of the entire British war effort.

The Dominion forces, fighting shoulder to shoulder with men from the British Isles, the British Empire and other Allied countries, played a considerable role throughout the campaign. Their involvement continually formed a fundamental part of British strategy and an indispensable element in desert operations. And if the Dominion efforts at sea and in the air are regularly and opaquely subsumed into the British story outside their own borders, in the desert war more than elsewhere writers acknowledge the presence of 'British and Commonwealth forces'. Nevertheless it is the extent of the Dominion contribution, rather than merely an acknowledgement of the Commonwealth presence in the desert, that is still often

unclear—what remains to be seen is how important this Dominion role was within the amalgamated forces. Furthermore, to a greater extent than the other arms of the military forces, the difficulties of alliance warfare on the ground—despite relatively intimate Commonwealth relations—were myriad and persistent. The desert war resolved many of the inconsistencies of the Commonwealth alliance in action. Along with solidifying the alliance, the desert campaign changed the course of the war for the UK. Indeed Churchill placed the conclusive battle of this conflict at the centre of his version of the British story—a *Hinge of Fate* in the British Empire's war experience—claiming, 'It may almost be said that "Before Alamein we never won a victory; after Alamein we never had a defeat."' <sup>11</sup>

I begin this section on the Dominion contribution in North Africa by setting the context of the war in the desert, 1940–2, before addressing some of the issues that combatants faced and the historical debates over the campaign. In the following chapter I consider the state of the Dominion armies in 1939, their relationship with the UK and how the contribution of Dominion land forces in the Second World War was affected by the legacy of the Great War. Next, attention shifts to the Dominion involvement in the war in the desert, using statistics and an analysis of the Dominion combat role to demonstrate the importance of this contribution to British victory. This leads into a discussion of how Anglo-Dominion forces performed as an alliance, particularly how Dominion governments expressed their national autonomy despite their military forces operating under the overall command of British generals. In the final chapter of this section, I consider the anomalous absence of Canadian divisions and the reasons behind Canada's decision to withhold ground contingents from this theatre, before I draw these elements together in the conclusion.

Most accounts of the desert war emphasise armoured warfare and the decisive importance of tanks in this theatre. This is a glamorous tale of technological advancement transformed into successful offensives and glory on the battlefield. In the Anglo-Dominion alliance, the UK provided the armoured units. It is therefore unsurprising that the successes of British imperial forces in the North African theatre are most closely associated with the UK and that the Dominion role is often considered peripheral, or played down because it was most important in the period when imperial forces were suffering many defeats. This section offers a corrective to that viewpoint: the infantry complement to armoured strength was an indispensable element of desert operations, one that was necessary for defence and in support of armoured offensives. The Dominion role in the

desert was an infantry role—for imperial forces *the* infantry role for much of 1940–2—which meant that the Dominions are most closely associated with defensive operations. Although these defensive actions were not always successful, they ensured that the Axis could not achieve total victory and that the pendulum kept swinging until the British imperial forces could muster the strength in personnel and equipment to land the decisive blow at Alamein. This section demonstrates that, similar to their financial, air and maritime efforts, the Dominions in this infantry role were essential to the UK surviving and continuing to fight until its larger allies fully mobilised in 1943.

## NOTES

1. W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate* (London, 1950), p. 319; I.S.O. Playfair et al., *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. IV: The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa* (London, 1966), p. 4.
2. S.J. Ball, *The Bitter Sea: The Struggle for Mastery in the Mediterranean, 1935–1949* (London, 2010), p. 3.
3. J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy, Vol. II, September 1939–June 1941* (London, 1957), p. 554.
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## The War in the Desert

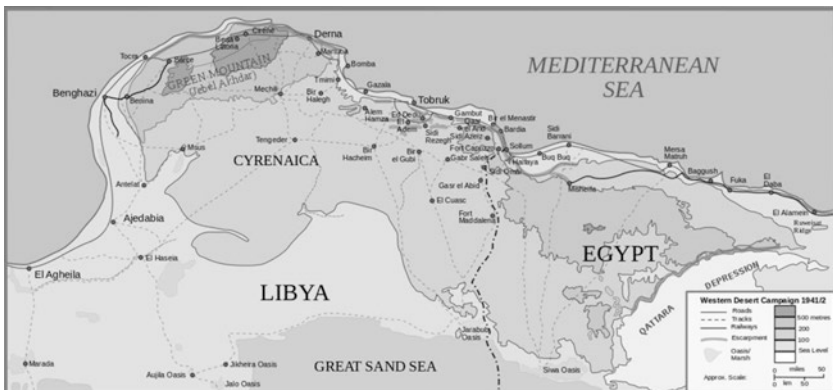
The story of the desert campaign seriously began with General Richard O'Connor's daring offensive against an Italian army that vastly outnumbered his small Commonwealth forces by more than five to one. In the face of the rapid French collapse in Europe in June 1940, Mussolini plunged Italy into war believing that the fight would be over by September. By sacrificing men on the battlefield, Mussolini hoped his country could take advantage of an Axis victory to break what he perceived as the Mediterranean shackles of French and British imperialism, which constrained Italy's own imperial ambitions. Disappointed by the postponed German invasion of the British Isles, thanks to the UK's defiant stand in the Battle of Britain, Mussolini instead instructed his reluctant commanders to advance on the Egyptian hub of British influence in the Middle East. Italian armies made slow, incremental moves beyond their East and North African colonies towards the heavily outnumbered British forces.

Lieutenant-General Archibald Wavell, British Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command (MEC), was charged with the task of converting the Suez military base into a centre from which the British position could be maintained. Despite struggling to maintain a truly vast area—ranging from Turkey in the north to the British East African colonies in the south, and east from the Persian Gulf to as far as his forces could advance in the west—with a paucity of forces, Wavell boldly authorized O'Connor to take advantage of Italian hesitancy and test the enemy's



resolve with an offensive. There followed a string of highly impressive victories that left the Italian forces reeling. Attacks in East Africa featuring South African and African colonial forces slowly eroded Italian positions to the south,<sup>1</sup> while the British 7th Armoured Division and the Australian 6th Division led the drive across Cyrenaica (eastern Libya). Supposed Italian strongholds in Libya—Mersa Matruh and Tobruk—tumbled as the outnumbered Commonwealth forces advanced. When Benghazi fell on 7 February 1941, O'Connor's Western Desert Force (WDF) stood astride Tripolitania with eyes cast towards Tripoli and the end of Italy's dream of Mediterranean dominance. The UK, humiliated in Norway and France, was finally on the crest of a wave of military victories (Map 14.1).

Hitler's attention turned southwards because a failing Italian invasion of Greece threatened to undermine the planned German attack on the Soviet Union. Hitler sent the Wehrmacht in to crush Yugoslavia and Greece. The UK, facing tremendous odds, nevertheless committed an expeditionary force to support its ally Greece—largely for the sake of *noblesse oblige* and with the opinions of other potential allies in mind.<sup>2</sup> Despite Churchill's concerns about relying so heavily on the use of Dominion troops even prior to the Greek campaign, the units despatched to south-east Europe were mainly Australian and New Zealander (Anzac).<sup>3</sup> The Anglo-Anzac force subsequently suffered heavy defeats, with important consequences for future military cooperation between the three countries,



**Map 14.1** Egypt & Cyrenaica, Libya: map of the Western Desert Campaign and its Operation Compass battle area (*Source*: Kirrage, S. (2007), Western Desert battle area 1941, Wikipedia)

before London once more directed a hasty retreat from the European continent in the face of an advancing German army. Further calamity ensued as Germany launched an audacious and successful airborne invasion of Crete, defended by forces that had escaped from Greece under the control of New Zealand commander General Freyberg.<sup>4</sup> The fierce defence of the island, which convinced Hitler to never again risk a similar paratrooper venture (crucially for Malta), did little to mitigate British embarrassment after the ill-fated endeavour in south-east Europe.

Compounding these defeats, German commander Rommel, commonly referred to as the Desert Fox for his military successes in this campaign,<sup>5</sup> arrived in North Africa. Denuded of forces for the defence of Greece, the skeletal remains of the British Western Desert Force in Cyrenaica were forced to attempt to maintain their position largely through bluff.<sup>6</sup> Rommel was not fooled. The German commander, believed by Allies and Axis alike to lack the necessary forces for a large offensive, displayed his adventurous temperament by defying his high command and probing British defences. On 6 April 1941, Rommel's advance sparked the second long journey across the desert, to which both opposing forces were to become wearily accustomed. Soon Rommel's army stood poised on the Egyptian border, with only the defiant Australian-led garrison at Tobruk left to show from the Commonwealth's previous advance.

Churchill badgered Wavell into making an early counter-offensive. There followed the aptly named offensive Brevity, in May 1941, which was quickly dissipated by German resistance. In June came a more serious attempt at dislodging German forces from Cyrenaica and relieving the besieged Tobruk: Operation Battleaxe, also unsuccessful, whereupon Churchill relieved Wavell of control and installed Auchinleck at the head of MEC.

Auchinleck was immediately under pressure from Churchill for a new offensive and, bolstered by a wave of reinforcements entering MEC, he did not wait long before turning Rommel's army back towards Tripolitania. The imperial force, now renamed as the Eighth Army and advancing under Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham, relieved Tobruk—the fortress had stubbornly held out for seven months—all the while harassing the German lines on the way back to Benghazi. In December 1941, Rommel was back at the point where he had first landed in the desert less than a year before, having advanced and retreated across Cyrenaica.

Nevertheless, the attack was a close-run escapade, and Auchinleck, in charge of a region much larger than just North Africa, increasingly kept his

eyes on MEC's exposed northern flank during the year. A German advance from the north could imperil the British-dominated Middle Eastern oil fields, relieving Axis oil shortages and depriving the UK of the Middle Eastern oil supplies. From there the position in Egypt would be threatened on two fronts, or German forces could move further east. Instability in Iraq in the spring had led Wavell to despatch a force comprised mainly of Indian soldiers to quell the opposition of the pro-German rebel government, while the insecure northern flank also inspired a successful invasion of French Vichy-controlled Syria and Lebanon. Both operations drained forces from North Africa during the summer of 1941. To complicate matters further, Japan's explosive entry into the war at the end of the year jeopardised the entire empire east of Suez. Auchinleck now found his forces denuded to reinforce the Pacific, just as Wavell had experienced for Greece, Crete, Iraq and Syria, while attempting to maintain enough strength in reserve to forestall any German attack from the north. To hold this position in early 1942, Auchinleck commanded just 11 divisions.

Rommel continued to test British lines in Libya and again found sufficient weakness to drive forward. Enjoying the advantage of a shortened line of supply from its main rearward base, Rommel's army inflicted another series of defeats—the Commonwealth forces were simply unable to hold a defensive line in the face of the onslaught. A break in Rommel's advance allowed the Allied forces to recover, but Rommel struck again in May 1942 at the Gazala line, 30 miles west of Tobruk. Here the Italo-German army scored a heavy victory over the Eighth Army, despite the latter's superior quantities of equipment.<sup>7</sup> Soon the Eighth Army, at this time under Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie, was in disarray, melting away in front of the enemy and undermining Dominion soldiers' faith in British leadership.<sup>8</sup> The retreat was only intermittently pierced by daring acts of resistance, like the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) breakout with bayonets fixed at Minqar Qaim led by General Freyberg in June 1942.<sup>9</sup> The Eighth Army retreated from Gazala on 14 June and Rommel quickly fell upon Tobruk on his way towards Egypt, this time taking the fortress, then under South African command, in just two days. Rommel felt Egypt was now within his grasp; Churchill was aghast. The fall of Tobruk, previously held for seven months against German attack, prompted an immortal Churchillian phrase—'Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another'—and his personal humiliation was exacerbated because news of its fall interrupted a conversation with the President at the White House.<sup>10</sup> British and Indian forces were subsequently captured as Mersa

Matruh fell. Just the Alamein line stood between Rommel and a complete victory in Egypt.

Auchinleck, aware that the British position in Egypt was now teetering on the brink of disaster, relieved Ritchie and took personal command of the Eighth Army. This move, long advocated by Churchill, helped to assuage continuing Dominion doubts about the competency of British commanders,<sup>11</sup> and proved a necessary step towards instilling fresh confidence in his heterogeneous army. The stubborn defence of the Alamein line against Rommel's July offensive, followed by repeated and futile attack and counter-attack by the opposing armies, seriously compromised Rommel's hopes of taking Egypt.

Auchinleck's successful defence of Egypt did not save him from Churchill's chagrin at the long retreat to Alamein, and he was replaced by General Harold Alexander as Commander-in-Chief MEC and by Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) Eighth Army in August. Montgomery now steadily built his forces while resisting both Churchill's calls for an early offensive and Rommel's attempted breakthrough of 30 August at Alam Halfa. With supplies reaching MEC in larger quantities than ever before,<sup>12</sup> Montgomery prepared his army for the greatest British victory of the desert war. The conclusive battle of Alamein began on 23 October 1942 and was won by 4 November. Four days later an Anglo-American force landed in north-west Africa.<sup>13</sup> Rommel fell back towards Tunisia with Montgomery and the Eighth Army moving steadily behind. Tobruk fell to the imperial forces on 13 November and ten days later Cyrenaica was once more in British hands. Tripoli fell to the Eighth Army in January 1943 and Montgomery pressed on into Tunisia.<sup>14</sup> Tunisia fell and Axis forces were finally defeated in North Africa in May 1943.

The war in the desert was fought across large open spaces, interspersed with thinly populated settlements, in economically underdeveloped areas. It presented the belligerents with what was, quite literally in most cases, a level playing field. For any attacking advantage gained through the lack of natural barriers between the Mediterranean to the north and the desert in the south, both opponents had to contend with the logistical problems the vast theatre posed.

The desert fight was a soldiers' war. There was little of the barbarism, the intense ideological and racial hatred, or the flouting of international agreements on the treatment of prisoners displayed on the Eastern Front.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, its scale was out of all proportion with that latter conflict—in

July 1942 Germany had 195 divisions employed in Eastern Europe, but provided just four for Rommel in Africa.<sup>16</sup> Yet for the life of a soldier, this difference was in degrees. Supply problems led to shortages for both sides; men new to the desert suffered wide-open sores around which mosquitoes persistently buzzed; dysentery and other afflictions were rife; and men were injured, maimed and killed as in any other theatre. Wandering through the carnage after Alamein to satisfy a morbid curiosity, one South African remarked, 'I was more than satisfied; I was sated and disgusted, and not a little saddened. All those men and all those fine machines utterly destroyed ... I have never seen or imagined such scenes of devastation. The conflict in Russia cannot be worse.'<sup>17</sup>

The debate about Churchill's commanders has dominated British historiography on North Africa. Incited by the prime minister's own memoirs, in which he placed the emphasis on key men over all other factors, the argument has raged across decades.<sup>18</sup> If Wavell's difficulties in establishing MEC with scarce resources for such a large geographical area were underplayed in the historiography, Auchinleck's dismissal in favour of Alexander and, most importantly, Montgomery has dominated discussion. Correlli Barnett's revisionist work, *The Desert Generals*, led the charge for 'Monty's' predecessors, attacking the suggestion that the new commander had taken hold of a disorganised, dispirited and virtually defeated Eighth Army and inspired an incredible reversal of fortune.<sup>19</sup> Other high-ranking generals have faced criticism and re-assessment too,<sup>20</sup> but the 'Monty' versus 'The Auk' debate has maintained the 'great man' historiography of the desert war as framed by Churchill's memoirs.

Regarding the Dominions, the importance of these men was in Anglo-Dominion relations and success on the battlefield (the two were quite closely intertwined at points). In these aspects Montgomery's experience in MEC was undoubtedly smoother. Arriving after the major Anglo-Dominion problems of command had been resolved, and with Alexander there to smooth the feathers he ruffled,<sup>21</sup> Montgomery enjoyed distinct advantages over his predecessors in dealing with the Dominions in the desert. Nevertheless Montgomery was a blunt and stubborn man who did not see eye to eye with those of similar rank; he had also experienced confrontations with Dominion independence before he arrived in the desert. After one such encounter, the Canadian commander Crerar believed he inspired in Montgomery 'a wider appreciation of the issues that were at stake' over the use of Dominion soldiers.<sup>22</sup> First impressions improved in the desert: the simple gesture of adopting an Australian slouch hat,<sup>23</sup> the

very representation of the Australian soldier tied visually to a birthplace of Australian national identity in Gallipoli, was striking. Neither Wavell nor Auchinleck made such a visual identification with any Dominion forces, although the former experienced a better relationship with the Dominion commanders.<sup>24</sup> The historiography has become increasingly rich in its explanation of the Eighth Army's performance in the desert, but personalities still have a part to play in the narrative.

How commanders deployed their forces also directly affected the Dominions. Divisions were the standard army combat unit for all the major belligerents in the Second World War, comprising around 15,000 men. Two or more divisions could form a corps, while in the British model divisions themselves were normally composed of three brigades, each brigade with three battalions. A brigade could be employed independently or call on the support of several field units, such as artillery, engineers or ambulance, to operate as a brigade group. To the man on the ground friendships were often limited to the few men immediately around him,<sup>25</sup> but such relations were supposedly facilitated up to the battalion level, with around 850 men all drawn from a specific locality in their home country to form each battalion.<sup>26</sup> In the desert war it was the choice between divisions and brigades that was the most divisive, for contemporaries and historians alike.<sup>27</sup>

Prior to Montgomery's command, the main tactical formation of choice was the brigade group. This is now labelled by some as a 'penny packet' approach to using what strength the Eighth Army possessed, and it was not until Montgomery's appointment—despite some lapses back to brigades<sup>28</sup>—that the division was made central to operations again.<sup>29</sup> O'Connor's dispersed forces performed superbly, but the inability of successive British commanders to concentrate force at the decisive point in battle before the summer of 1942, provides some justification for those claiming the weakness of the brigade group.<sup>30</sup>

Similar to the importance of British commanders, this debate over the use of brigades and divisions rarely incorporates the Dominions, but it is nonetheless important to an understanding of the Commonwealth alliance's performance in the desert. A major Dominion principle was the concentration of national forces. In transit this often meant battalions and small units; for training and in emergencies, this was in brigades; for normal action the minimum requirement was divisions; numbers permitting, the ideal concentration was in a national corps (with the exception of South Africa). This attitude therefore directly conflicted with the British

commanders' belief in the suitability of the brigade group. Indeed, corps operations were a long way removed from the free and interchangeable use of brigades that formed the basis of British tactical movement for much of the North African campaign, a cause of considerable Anglo-Dominion tension. Auchinleck claimed that "old Blamey" [the Australian commander] and the Australian Government derived their ideas from the first war and the western front in France. They were quite inapplicable to modern mobile warfare in the desert, where flexibility in the use of formations in the desert was essential.<sup>31</sup> Auchinleck was correct that the legacy of the Great War played an important part in determining the Dominion governments' approach to the desert war. Nevertheless this statement is more instructive about the perspective of British commanders: it relegates national identity issues and Australia's desire for the concentration of national forces to secondary importance, behind Auchinleck's own strategic thinking. This was a consistent source of tension, particularly in Anglo-Australian relations in MEC.

The Eighth Army consistently experienced difficulty in holding a defensive line; initiatives such as forming a line of fixed-box defences in open terrain proved inadequate in practice. As Rommel noted, defence in the desert relied as much on maintaining an offensive counter-attacking capability as it did on the line itself.<sup>32</sup> Fixed positions were too rigid to hold the wide front without additional personnel and firepower. The largely Australian force that held Tobruk—albeit a much smaller and better protected line—supported this point: the defenders maintained a striking-force capacity to effect a 'smothering, rather than a preventing, of a break-through'.<sup>33</sup> Yet for all his recognition of the situation, Rommel also oversaw two long and hasty retreats of Axis forces across the desert. The topography simply lent itself to the mobile attacker over the static defender while momentum could be maintained, until men and provisions became exhausted and supply lines strained. What mattered from the Dominion perspective was that hard-fought gains were quickly and completely surrendered to the enemy in long and arduous retreats, undermining faith in British leadership.<sup>34</sup>

The successful use of combined arms and the smooth interoperability between the imperial forces of the Eighth Army were central to its survival and eventual triumph. Yet beneath the surface there were fissures beyond the national fault lines. Tensions could emerge between units performing different roles: the failure to effectively combine the use of the various arms—particularly infantry, armour and artillery—into one

seamlessly operating war machine was a persistent and now notorious problem. British commanders failed to overcome this issue until 1942 and, with regard to integrating armour and infantry, never managed to match German levels of performance.<sup>35</sup>

This was another ostensibly Eighth Army problem that incited alliance differences. In the desert, the Dominions were providing the majority of the infantry, while the British provided all armoured formations. When the infantry felt that the armour had failed to support it adequately, this was usually a Dominion formation feeling left in the lurch by the British.<sup>36</sup> In practice, while the Dominions required British ancillary units and other vital services as a corollary to the British reliance on Dominion infantry, any operational failure to provide Dominion forces with adequate support could quickly escalate to the political level.<sup>37</sup>

Other desert war issues affected the Commonwealth alliance less directly, but rounded out the context in which the Anglo-Dominion forces were fighting. Supply lines were a major problem for the belligerents because of the distances they needed to stretch, over hundreds of miles of undeveloped desert terrain. Before they traversed the desert, however, resources had to reach the theatre. The Axis had the advantage of a short initial supply line from Italy across the Mediterranean, but this was countered by consistent harassment from British forces based at Malta, the effects of which became grave for Rommel's army in the summer of 1942.<sup>38</sup> Supply from the UK to British imperial forces took several months around the Cape Route or came across vast distances on the Indian Ocean from India and Australia.<sup>39</sup> In the theatre itself there were only a few supply ports—Mersa Matruh, Benghazi and Tobruk—available between the two main camps, all with a limited capacity for unloading tonnage.<sup>40</sup> With the main supply bases built up in western Libya (the Axis) and Egypt (the Eighth Army), the distance between the two proved too far for either army to maintain its forward momentum the full distance to the enemy's base to ensure final victory. It was not until the Allies poured vast quantities of equipment and supplies into both of the Axis' flanks in Egypt and north-west Africa that the campaign was won. The supply problems, combined with the difficulty of constructing solid defensive lines, ensured that the pendulum swung back and forth across the desert.

Communications and intelligence also played their part. One British disadvantage was the quality of wireless radio sets, which affected operations and only slowly improved in performance and number through 1942.<sup>41</sup> Ultra intelligence was a major boon for the British forces in North



Africa despite early problems in its utilisation.<sup>42</sup> Initially British commanders, unsure where the intelligence was originating from, were sceptical in its employment.<sup>43</sup> The quality and sources of information improved gradually, while the speed with which intelligence was intercepted and distributed in the desert also accelerated. Auchinleck failed to truly integrate Ultra intelligence into his system of command and strategy until the July battles of 1942; whereas Montgomery, benefitting from advancements at both ends of the intelligence pathway, enjoyed greater success in doing so. Rommel countered and negated this British advantage by gaining his own intelligence from radio intercepts, as well as air and land patrols. The UK had the advantage of following the wider strategic picture of the theatre; Rommel had a more complete picture of his adversaries' disposition on the ground in his immediate area. By the summer of 1942, however, the quality of British intelligence firmly swung the balance in the Allies' favour, playing an important role in the final victory over Rommel's army.

Indeed it was in the summer of 1942 that most of these issues were resolved, resulting in the Allied victory in the desert. Along with the improved use of Ultra and short lines of communication, Auchinleck took advantage of protected flanks and a relatively narrow front to shield himself from Rommel's favoured armoured hook manoeuvre and concentrate the Eighth Army at Alamein. Montgomery took command of an army that had held its own for several months and benefitted from a huge influx of equipment and reinforcements, not to mention protection under Allied air superiority.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Monty did more than just inherit a steadily improving force at an opportune moment—his style of command instilled fresh confidence in his troops, boosting morale. His tactical approach was significant: aside from insisting on using divisions instead of smaller brigade groups, his concentration of artillery on a relatively large scale for the desert was crucial in wearing down the opposing forces. Improvement in the operational performance of combined arms, particularly armour, infantry and air power, was largely down to his intense approach to training,<sup>45</sup> although this was another instance where circumstances favoured Monty over his predecessors, all of whom lacked the time and resources for similar training. Under Monty's leadership the Eighth Army became a force capable of wearing down its exhausted and over-extended adversaries.

Throughout its process of development, a substantial proportion of the Eighth Army was comprised of men from the Dominions, particularly in

the infantry. The desert war presented many problems for the belligerents, and the major issues concerning the Eighth Army often directly affected the Anglo-Dominion relationships. Nevertheless the alliance's experience mirrored the army's—although problems were persistent, ultimately the issues were overcome and the campaign was a success. In 1939, however, it was not clear whether the Dominions could form the primary infantry element in the UK's main fighting theatre. In fact, it was uncertain that their contribution would even be significant.

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## The Dominions in the Desert

Like the other arms of the Dominion forces, as war approached the size of existing army establishments did not suggest that these countries would be supplying the core of a North African-based Commonwealth army for over two years. The lack of strength is apparent from the numbers shown in Table 15.1.

Considering the total figures, the Dominions had available 201,925 personnel, or roughly 18 per cent of the combined Commonwealth total of just below 1.1 million. This was more substantial than the proportion they could initially offer in the air and naval efforts,<sup>1</sup> but the major burden still looked likely to fall on the UK—providing more than four out of every five men—especially given that through conscription, London had implemented a programme of major expansion that seemed unlikely to occur elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The combined Dominion total of fully trained permanent forces was just 11,771—this was more akin to two brigades than even a single complete division, based on available personnel numbers.

For cooperation in the field, the British Commonwealth Visiting Forces Act (1933) was legislation that provided a template for the UK and the Dominions to fight together, creating a legal framework for cooperative military action that recognised the Dominions' increasing inter-war autonomy.<sup>3</sup> It specified procedures for the command and control of Commonwealth forces comprised of units from more than one nation.<sup>4</sup> It institutionalised the tacit assumption of future military cooperation, highlighting the uniquely intimate Commonwealth relations; yet the desert

**Table 15.1** Strength of UK and Dominion armies as war approached

	<i>UK</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>South Africa</i>
Permanent	897,000	4,268	3,572	578	3,353
Reserve	–	86,308	80,000	10,346	13,500
Total	897,000	90,576	83,572	10,924	17,984

*Source:* Beaumont (1996), Long (1952), Orpen (1968)

experience proved that in practice, it left many of the broader questions of cooperation unresolved.

A major set of issues that coloured the Anglo-Dominion relationships in the desert campaign emerged from their previous cooperation during the Great War. These issues included the implementation of interoperability, the development of national identities and Dominion autonomy, the allocation of operational roles within the alliance, the entrenchment of popular assumptions, and the legacy of Dominion conscription crises. The first of these, the importance of fluidity in Commonwealth ground cooperation—interoperability—was demonstrated throughout the conflict, as Dominion and British forces were used interchangeably and shared rearward services.<sup>5</sup> As the conflict progressed, however, a push for the grouping of national forces took hold. The legacy of such national concentrations was that Dominion forces—as brigades, divisions and then corps—developed their own traditions, ideas and institutional memories from successful, or heroically futile, efforts and the subsequent commemoration of these upon returning home.<sup>6</sup>

The Great War effort also played its part in national development, particularly in Canada, where it was expressed as an important step towards political and economic maturity and independence;<sup>7</sup> and in Australia, where it became a keystone in an entire national identity that was being increasingly disentangled from the mother country.<sup>8</sup> Independent military establishments formed part of the independent national identities of the Dominions—it is unsurprising therefore that the employment of these forces once war began was as sensitive a subject as infringing upon the newly gained independence of the Dominions had been in the run up to the war. Even before the war, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain recorded that, ‘Since the Statute of Westminster they have become extraordinarily touchy about their status and are always on the look out to see that we don’t attempt to speak for them or assume that they will take the same view as we do.’<sup>9</sup>

During the Great War, it was largely up to the UK to provide the materiel for the imperial nations, with an increasing Canadian contribution. Production during the Second World War followed this trend, with the UK providing over 90 per cent of imperial munitions to the end of 1940, a proportion that remained above 60 per cent even after the USA entered the war. At its peak the British Empire supplied just short of 95 per cent of its own munitions, and in no given year produced less than 70 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

These statistics convey two main points. The first is that equipment for the Commonwealth armed forces was highly standardised and the second is that in large proportion it was supplied by the UK. The role of the UK in equipping the Dominion armies was crucial for interoperability to work smoothly: equipment could be exchanged from a British to a Dominion force without significant training being required for it to be integrated; ancillary and support units could operate with different forces without peculiarities and difficulties arising. The other side of this relationship was that the UK, outstripped by Germany in the armaments race and having abandoned the British Expeditionary Force's equipment at Dunkirk, was forced to establish priorities over which divisions received what could be produced.<sup>11</sup> When the Australian and New Zealand contingents first arrived in the Middle East, a large proportion of their equipment had to be supplied by the UK.<sup>12</sup> Not only was the process slow, the initial cost fell on the UK and the process deprived a potential British division of the same supplies.<sup>13</sup> This inability of the UK to supply a British division when equipment was given to the newly formed Dominion contingents was one reason why the Dominions continually formed the bulk of the infantry in the desert.<sup>14</sup> Despite the loss of equipment for a British division, the UK was willing to supply Dominion divisions first to solidify the alliance in action.

Equipment was largely standardised, and training and operational methods mostly converged during the war, despite variances that had developed in the interwar period while the Dominion armies were responsible for home defence. The resulting Anglo-Dominion differences were mostly removed in a short space of time upon the outbreak of war—divisional establishments, for instance, had varied between the UK and the Dominions, but the latter made efforts to adopt the British style once war was declared.<sup>15</sup> Yet the right to develop independently was not so easily forgotten; even in the desert, the Dominion formations 'manifested a desire to devise their own methods and styles'.<sup>16</sup> While integrating a variation of styles and ideas was a potential advantage for the Eighth Army, it

went against the standardisation of practice on which commanders placed a high premium, since the latter was a bulwark against the breakdown of battle plans and cooperation in action.

Furthermore, any individual developments of style or operational practice affected a crucial factor in the Anglo-Dominion cooperative relationship: the UK was supplying the majority of ancillary units in the desert, as during the Great War. This was another *quid pro quo* of the heavy reliance on Dominion infantry, as the shortage of manpower in these countries meant that the UK provided these additional, but essential, units to sustain Dominion men in combat roles.<sup>17</sup> For London this was a worthwhile division of labour. Conversely in the desert, the Dominions—South Africa excepted—showed marked reluctance for their own smaller units, up to brigade level, to join and support larger British units. From the Dominion perspective this stance was based on their desire to maintain national units, not to disperse their manpower into British divisions; however, the Dominions could not operate without British assistance. Despite their dependence on British rearward services, the Dominions insisted that the UK could form its own combat units by reshuffling its own pack. London was initially appeased because the Dominions were providing more rearward units than in the previous war, but as manpower shortages emerged questions were asked.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this imbalance in the military relationship was expected before the war, so when the conflict arrived a solution was relatively easy to navigate which, for the most part, satisfied both the senior and junior partners.

South African interwar military developments were the most divergent from the British model because the large white Afrikaner population countered the British influence in the country. The Union Defence Force (UDF) divisions were fully mechanised like the British Army but contained many more vehicles. This proved to be a boon in East Africa, where this mechanisation undoubtedly played a role in the successes that the largely South African and colonial forces enjoyed there.<sup>19</sup> In the desert, however, South Africa's existing vehicles were deemed unsuitable for the new environment and required replacement.<sup>20</sup> Given the scarcity of equipment and shipping, this became a lengthy process. For the South African divisions developed as mechanised units, this prevented training and participation in active operations.<sup>21</sup> The result was that they effectively became garrison troops as the divisions waited for new equipment. This was an example of how anomalies in training and equipment between the forces could undermine operational capability.



Another legacy of the Great War was the reputation of Dominion troops as elite soldiers. Built on idealised and romantic views within the metropole of Anglo-Saxon settlers supposedly living in rugged, rural landscapes, this perception was slow to fade due to the reinforcement it received during the Great War.<sup>22</sup> The corollary of this, in the Dominions, was the persistent belief that British commanders had sacrificed lives too willingly, and in some cases astoundingly ineptly, during the battles of 1914–18. The growth in nationalism, the uneasiness at British command and the belief in the innate ability of each country's own men at soldiering were further motivations for the Dominions to concentrate their own forces under national command.<sup>23</sup> These notions were expressed most forcefully when the war in the desert, or beyond, was progressing poorly.<sup>24</sup>

The shrewd use of available forces was additionally important because every Commonwealth government shared one important problem: a shortage of manpower for a long war. The UK had a population of close to 46.5 million in 1939; the Dominions' combined white population was around 22 million, about half that of the UK.<sup>25</sup> In the Dominions, significant non-British populations did not enlist at the same rate as those identifying as British. Only New Zealand had a population almost as homogeneously British as the UK's. It is no coincidence that conscription was instituted there as early as 1940, even before the manpower shortages started to really bite.

Australia and Canada both suffered a conscription crisis in the Great War with lasting implications, particularly in Canada where it shattered the Conservative Party's interwar support in French-speaking Quebec. The fear of a similar crisis was the driving force behind many of Canadian Prime Minister King's policies during the war—indeed it probably ensured that the Canadian Army remained out of the desert war. Yet the pressure of maintaining the three arms of the Canadian forces in their increasing combatant roles convinced King to call a plebiscite in 1942, asking the public to release the government from its 'no conscription' promise. After he uttered his famous line 'not necessarily conscription; but conscription if necessary', King's government was duly freed from its pledge. Conscripted men were levied for overseas combat in November 1944, but conscription proved largely unnecessary and the limited use of conscripted manpower avoided repercussions on the Great War scale. That King felt conscription was necessary at all, however, demonstrated the strain the war effort placed on the limited Dominion populations.<sup>26</sup>

Australia's main opponents to conscription were citizens of Irish Catholic descent and an increasing number of nationalists, although the whole country had been divided on the issue during the Great War.<sup>27</sup> Conscription was brought in only for home defence during the Second World War, the extent of which was eventually expanded to cover the Pacific theatre south of the equator; however, conscripts were largely kept out of active theatres. A lack of conscription in the two most populous Dominions (excluding non-whites) therefore constrained the level at which their manpower could be mobilised for action abroad. With the knowledge that only volunteers could serve overseas, both governments were watchful when considering the extent of their manpower commitments and possible casualties.

The composition of South Africa's population presented it with unique difficulties, some of them self-inflicted. The UDF was formed as a white-only organisation, but the manpower requirements of the Great War had necessitated the employment of non-white personnel.<sup>28</sup> By 1939, non-whites outnumbered whites by approximately four to one in the Union, so it was unsurprising that this precedent of utilising non-white manpower was followed in the Second World War. The treatment of non-white personnel in the Union's forces, however, was extremely poor. While many white servicemen were not racist,<sup>29</sup> it has been claimed that racism affected every non-white man that served with the UDF.<sup>30</sup> A memory of mistreatment during the Great War and a subsequent lack of memorialisation for their effort; poor rates of pay; a non-combat role; deceptive recruiting and a lack of training; exclusion from white servicemen's social areas: all these factors contributed to lacklustre non-white recruitment and the consistent ill-discipline of many who did serve.<sup>31</sup> Yet despite these problems, 37 per cent of the UDF's personnel during the war were non-white.<sup>32</sup>

These race issues, however, provided just part of the Union's difficulties. Another was that a slight majority of the white population were Afrikaners, not British, and therefore recruits were often the sons and grandsons of men who had fought a bitter struggle against the British Empire at the turn of the century. As Hancock claimed, whereas Australia could 'use population and nation as interchangeable terms', this was something South Africa could not do.<sup>33</sup> The question of whether Afrikaners would fight in a British war had been answered during the Great War, yet the proportion that would volunteer and how loyal and committed they would be remained an issue. The estimated Afrikaner percentage of white UDF personnel has varied widely,<sup>34</sup> but the Union's demography

and recruitment records prove that Afrikaner enlistment was undeniably a substantial element. Whether this undermined the spirit or performance of the forces is even harder to judge.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless British officials feared that the anti-British Afrikaner mentality would undermine morale in the Union,<sup>36</sup> while the dedication of Afrikaner members of South Africa's military command was also questioned—including Hendrik Klopper, fortress commander at the surrender of Tobruk in June 1942,<sup>37</sup> and even Prime Minister Smuts' Chief of Staff Pierre van Ryneveld, who was labelled in several secret reports as anti-British and not fully committed to the war effort.<sup>38</sup> South Africa's manpower problems were multiple and enduring, limiting the size of the forces that the Union could sustain in an active theatre.

These issues affected the decision of Dominion governments to send their troops overseas. The first Dominion division to arrive in the UK came from Canada, yet it did not fight in the desert. New Zealand and Australia announced the raising of divisions in September 1939, but it remained unclear if, when and where they would be despatched abroad. Wellington announced its decision to have its troops move to the Middle East on 21 November 1939 and, despite uncertainties in Canberra over the equipping and final destination of the Australian division, the disgruntled Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies followed suit a week later.<sup>39</sup> The plan was initially to train these units in the Middle East, but the catastrophes of 1940 meant that most fought in the desert. Australia's initial trepidation soon gave away to enthusiastic effort—during 1940 the single-division expeditionary force was authorised to become three divisions, and by Christmas 1940, there were almost 50,000 Australians in the Middle East, instead of the original number of 16,000 anticipated for that date.<sup>40</sup>

In South Africa, Smuts had a difficult job convincing the country that the war should be fought so far north, since the military pledge of the UDF was to serve in defence of the Union. Before Italian entry into the war, however, Smuts felt confident enough to offer South African forces for East Africa.<sup>41</sup> The Dominions Office (DO) fretted that the subsequent refusal by the UK to accept this offer, for fear of antagonising Mussolini, could harm Smuts' position and general enthusiasm for the war.<sup>42</sup> The Italian dictator's decision to fight, however, simplified Smuts' position—the war could be fought in Africa for regional defence.<sup>43</sup> With Churchill repeatedly urging both Smuts and Wavell to employ UDF ground personnel outside of the Union,<sup>44</sup> the South African premier sanctioned deployment

in East Africa. Success there and relative domestic stability soon allowed Smuts to push his forces further north to the desert. The opposition goaded him at home, questioning the relationship of Egypt to South Africa's defence,<sup>45</sup> but Smuts increasingly used the Union's war effort to his domestic political advantage.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, South Africans crossed the Mediterranean and fought in Italy.<sup>47</sup>

With the exception of Canada, the Dominions made it to the desert. Small pre-war army establishments did not prevent the raising of substantial expeditionary forces. The mere presence of these soldiers in the campaign is not the whole story, however, since, as we have seen, a host of legacies from the Great War and the interwar period affected how these forces were employed under overall British command. Before examining how the issues of the desert war interplayed with these legacies, it is instructive to look at just how great the Dominion contribution was.

Despite the many inconsistencies of the Anglo-Dominion alliance, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand represented the Dominions in the desert theatre from 1940 to the decisive victory at Alamein in 1942. Using War Office (WO) reports, it is possible to ascertain how important the presence of Dominion troops was in the Middle East.<sup>48</sup> The WO statistics have the additional advantage of showing the figures that were influencing policy-makers in London—revealing how those in control of grand strategy perceived the Dominion military contribution (Fig. 15.1).

The statistics in Fig. 15.2 end at December 1942. In strategic terms, this date was selected because, after the decisive Alamein victory (November 1942), Rommel held no defensive position firmly until the Mareth Line in Tunisia (March 1943), which is beyond the scope of this analysis. With regard to MEC, in November 1942 it appeared likely that the forces comprising the Eighth Army would largely change in 1943, because the Dominion governments almost simultaneously asked to withdraw their units. New Zealand eventually agreed to leave its division with the Eighth Army, but Australia could not be persuaded to do the same because of the Japanese threat to the South Pacific. Smuts decided to bring home the remaining South African division for leave in 1943, at which time it was to be refitted as an armoured division. He announced this when visiting his troops, before informing London of his decision, and therefore presented the UK with a *fait accompli*. Following Smuts' announcement and before New Zealand's change of heart was known, a 'disquieted' Churchill showed his concern on 25 November 1942, asking 'Are we not dispersing this army rather rapidly?'<sup>49</sup> The two-year period

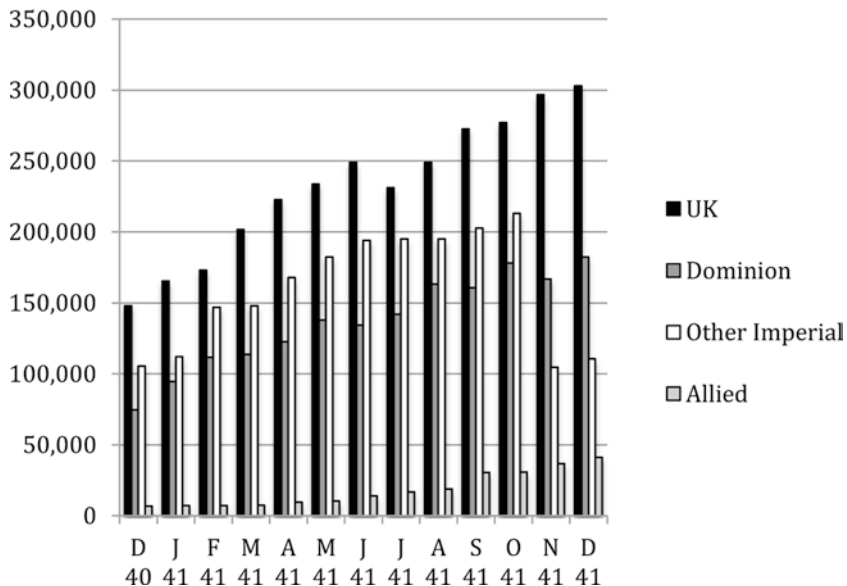
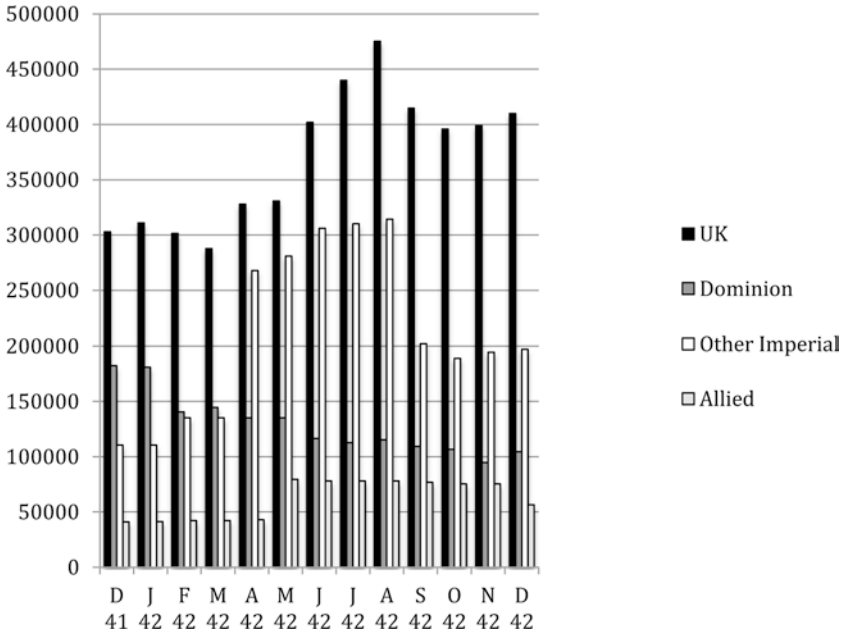


Fig. 15.1 Imperial and Allied personnel in the desert, Dec. 1940–Dec. 1941 (Source: WO 163/50)

that the statistics cover was therefore the most important period in terms of the war in North Africa, the same years during which the Dominions were most heavily engaged.

From February 1941, the Dominions provided more than 100,000 men for the desert campaign, a situation that persisted until November 1942. The number was above 150,000 from August 1941 until February 1942, a critical period during which the Allied desert forces surged forward and inflicted reverses on Rommel's forces. The 'other imperial' contribution appears very large until London excluded East Africa from the statistics in November 1941—then it becomes apparent that around 50 per cent of this figure was actually not serving in the desert, but rather in East Africa, and a significant portion of those in North Africa were responsible for garrison and rearward duties, with the exception of two Indian divisions.<sup>50</sup>

As a Dominion percentage of the total personnel available, it is instructive to consider some key dates: the launching of Operation Battleaxe (June 1941)—23 per cent; the point when the Middle East figures are



**Fig. 15.2** Imperial and Allied personnel in the desert, Dec. 1941–Dec. 1942  
(*Source*: WO 163/51)

separated from the East African theatre and Operation Crusader was in full flow (November 1941)—28 per cent; the Alamein defensive under Auchinleck (July 1942)—12 per cent; and the Alamein offensive under Montgomery (October 1942)—14 per cent.

Setting aside the data fluctuation caused by the other imperial personnel in East Africa, included in London's data until November 1941, the Dominions provided around 25 per cent of the total personnel available in North Africa. More instructive still, looking at only the Anglo-Dominion numbers, the Dominions maintained above 50 per cent of the corresponding UK total from December 1940 right through to February 1942, when two Australian divisions departed for the war in the Pacific. Indeed in February 1941, the Dominion element was equivalent to 65 per cent of the UK's figure. That the Dominion total was more than half of the UK total for so long was a truly substantial effort—the overwhelming majority of these men were volunteers, from countries with a combined white population of under 50 per cent of the British Isles.

Many infantry divisions were sent to aid the British Empire in its most active front: here the Great War example was repeated. Based on these figures alone, the Dominion contribution was indispensable. How could the UK have resisted Rommel and struck back without this additional strength at its disposal in the desert? Yet even this does not truly capture the extent or importance of what the Dominions were providing. More than just personnel, the majority of what the Dominions offered was combat troops—most specifically infantry. These were, to quote Pratten, ‘Soldiers with rifle, bayonet and machine guns ... their role was to seek out and close with the enemy, kill or capture their personnel, and occupy and hold ground’.<sup>51</sup> Bearing the above figures in mind, this becomes most apparent when casualty figures are considered at various points (Table 15.2).

While casualties vary depending on the circumstances of any battle, a sustained fighting role generally has a strong correlation with higher casualty figures. From Table 15.2, we can see that the Dominions were, as a proportion of their personnel in the Middle East, consistently over-represented on the battlefield. At the end of 1940 the Dominions made up less than 25 per cent of MEC’s personnel, but were taking over 30 per cent of the casualties. At the end of the following year, the corresponding

**Table 15.2** Battle casualties in North Africa at various dates, Nov. 1940–July 1942

<i>November 1940–February 1941</i>		
	Casualty figures	Percentage of total
UK	1,260	42
Dominions	927	31
Colonial	779	26
<i>18 November 1941–10 January 1942</i>		
	Casualty figures	Percentage of total
UK	6,674	38
Dominions	9,234	53
Indian	1,274	7
Allied	253	1
<i>27 May–24 July 1942</i>		
	Casualty figures	Percentage of total
UK	36,000	53
Dominions	18,700	27
Allied	13,600	20

Source: WO 163/50 and WO 163/51, TNA; Fennell (2011), p. 41

figures were under 30 per cent and over 50 per cent, and by the summer battles of 1942, they stood at under 15 per cent of personnel and over 25 per cent of casualties. Put simply, men from the Dominions were in the desert to fight and die.

These statistics confirm the relationship between Dominion and British forces, namely that the UK was responsible for supplying many of the ancillary and line of communication (L of C) personnel. The Dominions played a part in some of these support roles, perhaps most notably with a large number of sappers;<sup>52</sup> however, their main contribution remained infantry.

To highlight how this relationship worked in action, the figures in Table 15.3 reveal personnel numbers employed during Operation Crusader (up to and including January 1942) and the infantry forces listed by the WO as under Auchinleck's control in January 1942.

The divisions listed in Table 15.3 covered the entire MEC—not every division was thus employed in Crusader<sup>53</sup>—but the figures show that despite the Dominions providing the bulk of the infantry divisions available, they did not constitute the majority of personnel in the Crusader major offensive. This illustrates how important the British ancillary role truly was; without it the Dominion forces simply could not have functioned.<sup>54</sup> The UK provided the military framework and infrastructure upon which all other forces depended: armoured divisions, the bulk of the artillery and the majority of the corps, army, L of C and base troops, for a Command with personnel speaking 43 different languages—an impressive role that London thought others were liable to forget.<sup>55</sup> This explains why the UK was supplying the majority of personnel in MEC, even during offensives that involved mainly Dominion infantry divisions. Just as the Dominions' divisions could not function without the British ancillary

**Table 15.3** Imperial personnel numbers employed in Operation Crusader and Auchinleck's available forces

	<i>Personnel used in Operation Crusader</i>	<i>Available infantry divisions</i>
UK	82,000	2
Dominion	54,000	6
Indian	19,000	2

*Source:* Fennell (2011), p. 41



units, however, the British were reliant on the large Dominion infantry contribution around which the actual combat strategy was based.

Since the whole military machine was dependent upon the interaction of its multitude of constituent parts, comparing the usefulness of each role has little merit. One point is of particular importance when considering this Dominion role as primarily infantry. As mentioned above, a manpower shortage was felt across the Commonwealth as the war progressed, and each Dominion had domestic political motivations to consider as these shortages became acute, in addition to the general obligation to protect the welfare of its troops. Furthermore, Canada, in part, remained out of the desert for political reasons. As such, a large infantry contribution was not only a significant political decision, it was of an importance beyond the proportion of its numbers to London—when the Dominions were consistently absorbing over 25 per cent, and at some points over 50 per cent, of the desert casualties in battle, the UK was being shielded from these losses. Put simply, infantry units sustained the most significant casualties in the desert war and the Dominions provided the infantry. With the UK's own serious manpower shortages as the war progressed, this was another reason why the Dominion contribution, in form *and* in numbers, was so valuable.

## NOTES

1. At 6 per cent and 8 per cent respectively, see Part II and Part III.
2. New Zealand was the exception.
3. C.P. Stacey, *Arms and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 560.
4. J.M.A. Gwyer & J.R.M. Butler, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: Grand Strategy, Vol. III, Book 1: June 1941–August 1942* (London, 1964), p. 44.
5. R. Holland, 'The British Empire and the Great War, 1914–1918' in W.M. Roger Louis & J.M. Brown (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 129.
6. For more on the Dominion effort in the Great War, see G. Martin, 'Financial and Manpower Aspects of the Dominions' and India's Contribution to Britain's War Effort, 1914–1919' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1987).
7. J. Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997).

8. C. Bean (ed.) *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18, 12 volumes* (Canberra, 1920–1942). This series was particularly influential, playing up the Anzac myth and the separate nature of Australians in comparison to Britons. Bean continued to promote this thinking in his role as director of the Australian War Memorial, using his reputation to encourage this trend. See D. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945* (Canberra, 1982), pp. 44–5.
9. R. Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, Vol. IV: The Downing Street Years, 1934–1940* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 228.
10. H. Duncan Hall, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Series: North American Supply* (London, 1955), p. 428.
11. M. Howard, *Grand Strategy, Vol. IV: August 1942–September 1943* (London, 1972), p. 13.
12. ‘Summary of the AIF’s first year abroad’, AWM 54, 524/7/1; G. Hensley, *Beyond the Battlefield: New Zealand and its Allies, 1939–45* (North Shore, 2009), p. 62.
13. D. French, *Raising Churchill’s Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919–1945* (Oxford, 2000), p. 235.
14. Meetings of the Army Council, 1942, WO 163/51. See also Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Commonwealth Government, Canberra, 23 May 1940, A5954, 580/8.
15. G. Pratten, *Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 80; C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939–45: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa, 1948), p. 94.
16. M. Johnston & P. Stanley, *Alamein: the Australian Story* (Oxford, 2002), p. 13; Pratten, *Australian Battalion Commanders*, p. 111.
17. This was not just the case in the desert either. For Canada, see Stacey, *Canadian Army*, p. 93; Memorandum on ‘Canadian Army Programme, 1943–44: Overseas’, MG 27 III B II, vol. 38.
18. W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. II: Their Finest Hour* (London, 1949), pp. 619–20.
19. ‘Notes on a conversation with an officer of the West African Rifles’, WO 106/2351.
20. ‘Notes on an interview with Col. D.H. Ollemans: Sidi Rezegh’, UWH 127, ME 1.
21. N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War Two, (Vol. III): War in the Desert* (Cape Town, 1971), p. 288.
22. J.P. Bourke, ‘The Australian Soldier as Others See Him, Part II: The Second AIF’, MSS0710, W2. B.H. Liddell Hart (ed.), *The Rommel Papers* (London, 1953), pp. 132, 240.

23. D. Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945* (Canberra, 1982), p. 43.
24. I.S.O. Playfair, *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series: War in the Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. III: British Fortunes Reach their Lowest Ebb* (London, 1960), p. 361.
25. Estimations placed populations at approximately: South Africa, 2.1m white (10.1m total); Canada 11.3m; Australia 7m; New Zealand 1.5m.
26. J.L. Granatstein, *Conscription in the Second World War, 1939–1945: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto, 1969); J.L. Granatstein and J. M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto, 1977); R. MacGregor Dawson, *The Conscription Crisis of 1944* (Toronto, 1961).
27. Two referendums returned a ‘no’ vote that blocked conscription.
28. In the Great War the Cape Coloured Corps was permitted a combat role by the Union, even on the Western Front. D. Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 5, 71.
29. Indeed some reports claimed that there was great cooperation between white South Africans and non-white colonial personnel from outside the Union. Undoubtedly this was an exaggerated Eurocentric version of events—claiming the West African soldiers ‘idolised’ the UDF—but the success in the field suggests, at least, that relatively harmonious relations were maintained. ‘Notes on a conversation with an officer of the West African Rifles’, WO 106/2351.
30. The prevalent attitude of white South Africans is captured in the Union official histories of the war, with statements such as: ‘Brigade and Battalion commanders were unanimous that average Natives would fail them as drivers under air attack.’ Orpen, *War in the Desert*, p. 20.
31. ‘History of B Coy.’ UWH 158, UNFO 12. See also Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, pp. 73, 84–5, 134–5, 156–7.
32. W.K. Hancock, *Smuts, Vol. II: The Fields of Force 1919–1950* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 331. See also, S. Dubow & A. Jeeves (eds), *South Africa’s 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* (Cape Town, 2005), p. 15.
33. Hancock, *Smuts, II*, p. 330.
34. A. Grundlingh, ‘The King’s Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa’s Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939–45’, *The Journal of African History*, 40, 3 (1999), 351–365 p. 354.

35. J. Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 44; Orpen, *War in the Desert*, p. 369.
36. Applin to Croft, 5 March 1940, WO 216/49.
37. Responsibility for the Fall of Tobruk, PM 1/54/12.
38. 'Report by Major Ryde, M.I.5 representative in Pretoria, 30 Sept. 1943', CAB 120/475; Applin to Croft, 5 March 1940, WO 216/49.
39. D. Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort, 1939–45* (St. Leonard's, 1996), p. 14. Appreciations (Mr Bruce, Mr Casey), A816, 52/302/135 and Strategical Appreciation in relation to Empire Co-operation and Local Defence, A5954, 580/8.
40. 'Summary of the AIF's first year abroad', AWM54, 524/7/1.
41. Gwyer & Butler, *Grand Strategy, III, I*, p. 43.
42. Dominions Office Minute, February 1940, DO 35/1003/6.
43. 'Govt. Information Officer – Statement issued to the Press (18/4/40) by Press Liaison Officer', UWH 249, Press 60.
44. Churchill, *Second World War, II*, pp. 375, 377; Churchill, *Second World War, III*, p. 75.
45. Hancock, *Smuts, II*, p. 370.
46. Hancock, *Smuts, II*, pp. 380–1.
47. Memo for Prime Minister by Brooke, 29 June 1943, CAB 120/475.
48. These figures consistently over-represent the British contribution because they include British troops in transit to the Middle East and the British figures were not immediately adjusted downwards for casualties, unlike the Dominion figures.
49. Minute by Churchill, 25 November 1942, CAB 120/475.
50. There were often roughly 50,000 Indian troops present (for instance in May 1941 the figure was 54,600), the majority of which were the fighting divisions in MEC. Figures from: Papers and Minutes of the 1st to 11th Meetings of the Army Council Held During 1941, WO 163/50.
51. Pratten, *Australian Battalion Commanders*, p. 3.
52. 'Sappers' was the term used for military engineers. N. Orpen & H.J. Martin, *South African Forces World War II, Vol. VIII: Salute the Sappers, 2 vols.* (Johannesburg, 1981–1982).
53. The breakdown of infantry divisions actually employed in Operation Crusader were roughly Dominion 223; Indian 1; British 23.

54. 'The AIF in the Middle East', AWM54, 521/3/12.
55. 'Manpower of the Middle East Forces, Report by Colonel McCandlish, 9 January 1942', WO 163/51. See also, Playfair, *Mediterranean and Middle East, III*, p. 372.

## The Alliance in the Desert

The Commonwealth alliance was the closest in the world before the war and endured the entire conflict. Yet when it was put to the test in the ground war, the ambiguities of the Commonwealth relationship, the different priorities of the Dominions and London's control were all challenged. Many tensions emerged, some of which simmered for long periods awaiting resolution, while others quickly reached boiling point. The experience in the desert revealed both the strengths and the limitations of the Commonwealth relationship under the strain of war.

One enduring point was Dominion distrust of British commanders, a palpable legacy of the Great War. The Dominions therefore took active and immediate steps to protect the integrity of their forces during the conflict. Canada's approach was to stick closely to the British Commonwealth Visiting Forces Act regulations; however, the nations sending forces to fight in the desert adopted a different approach. Both Australia and New Zealand created a charter for their respective commanders, giving them a level of power and responsibility that challenged the position of their British superiors. South Africa pursued a very different approach towards command. These differing systems require further explanation, because neither functioned without creating difficulties with the UK.

Australia's commander Blamey and New Zealand's commander Freyberg were given wide-ranging powers over the employment of their forces. They could deny the use of their soldiers if they thought the

soldiers' welfare was at stake; they could refuse the detachment of units and insist upon the concentration of national contingents; and, the cause of the greatest friction, in any dispute with their British superiors they were allowed recourse to their national government if they deemed it necessary. The dispute was then raised from the operational level and lifted to the political arena.

Churchill claimed New Zealand had 'never made a fault, nor must we'.<sup>1</sup> This statement represented London's perception, often a reality, that New Zealand was the more compliant of the Pacific Dominions (indeed, of all the Dominions) in most aspects of its Anglo-Dominion relationship. Freyberg was no exception.<sup>2</sup> He was a New Zealander by birth, but earned his reputation after progressing through the British Army system. Wellington initially fretted that the man given to them was not up to the task of leading the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) and feared that Freyberg's British Army background could cloud his primary responsibility to protect the nation's soldiers, where this compromised British strategy. These worries were unfounded, as both Freyberg and the 2NZEF proved to be some of the best fighters in the desert. Freyberg's fighting reputation was such that Churchill seriously considered promoting the 2NZEF's commander to the head of MEC.<sup>3</sup> In the desert, Freyberg initially allowed Wavell to use his forces piecemeal, but soon called for the concentration of his units.<sup>4</sup> This single-mindedness extended to refusing to countenance the consolidation of the incomplete Anzac units into an Australasian Division.<sup>5</sup> Freyberg was committed to maintaining an independent New Zealander presence in North Africa, despite the close relationship—particularly in soldiering – between the two Pacific Dominions and the likelihood that this Anzac force would be under his command.

The most controversial episode of his command was the unsuccessful defence of Crete that he led somewhat reluctantly,<sup>6</sup> later claiming it was an impossible strategic predicament.<sup>7</sup> Although Freyberg informed Wellington of his uncertainty over the situation, he did not explicitly state that he thought defending Crete with his resources was impossible. After the defeat, New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser noted in a letter to the Foreign Office (FO) that he was 'surprised to learn now from Freyberg that he never considered the operation a feasible one, though as I pointed out to him his telegrams earlier conveyed a contrary impression'.<sup>8</sup> The resulting defeat, and loss of personnel, deeply affected the New Zealand government, prompting a rare letter of warning from Fraser to London about adequately supporting the 2NZEF with air cover, a message that

required the British premier to reassure Wellington.<sup>9</sup> The Crete disaster was a nadir for Freyberg at the head of the 2NZEF. The commander admitted that, although he should have privileged the welfare of the 2NZEF, concerns about questioning his superiors affected his decision. Fraser 'made it plain to him [Freyberg] that in any future case where he doubts the propriety of a proposal, he is to give War Cabinet in Wellington a full opportunity of considering the proposal',<sup>10</sup> and quietly enquired about the possibility of replacing the commander in London—only interjections by Wavell and Auchinleck saved Freyberg from this ignominious removal.<sup>11</sup> His subsequent performance proved this to be a wise decision.<sup>12</sup>

Blamey was a much more controversial figure. Unlike Freyberg, he was a domestic product and harboured both respect and resentment for the British Army system, sometimes occasioned by his role as Australian commander but at other times reflecting personal bias. With an outsider's perspective, Blamey maintained clarity over his national responsibility that was only once clouded by the competing demands of his imperial position. Unlike Freyberg, Blamey resisted the initial suggestion of Wavell to supply units for the Long Range Patrol Group and then supported Freyberg in blocking an Australasian Division.<sup>13</sup> These early exchanges between the Australian and his British superior set a precedent, Blamey believed, and the two men developed a healthy respect for each other's position—Blamey was sympathetic over the huge area Wavell commanded with such limited forces; Wavell was sensitive to Blamey's national responsibilities. In practice this relationship was more difficult for Wavell than for Blamey, because the former was regularly in need of Australian units.<sup>14</sup>

Again, the Balkan expedition unsettled the relationship. Wavell convinced Blamey to allow an Australian division to take part, perhaps disingenuously referencing Australian Prime Minister Menzies' supposed acceptance of the plan.<sup>15</sup> Like New Zealand, Australia had serious questions about the ensuing disaster. Blamey acted just as Freyberg did, voicing concerns to his government at a very late stage before retrospectively claiming that the operation had no chance of success.<sup>16</sup> In permitting Australians to travel to Greece, Blamey's loyalties to his commander and his national force collided, causing a moment of flux in his otherwise clear conception of his role as Australian commander. Upon his return to North Africa, Blamey was never again so easily convinced to support British strategic plans when he had strong misgivings about the operation and the subsequent welfare of Australian divisions. This shift in attitude was important because London—worried about the consistent use



(and now misuse) of its Dominion allies—promoted Blamey to the position of deputy in MEC, to acknowledge the prominence of Dominion manpower in the theatre.<sup>17</sup> ‘The appointment has its awkward points particularly for a dominions officer ... there is a Machiavellian touch in its implementation’, wrote the Australian commander.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to steeling the attitude of the Australian and New Zealander commanders, the debacle in Greece and Crete also undermined O’Connor’s early achievements in the desert war, reigniting the Dominions’ smouldering suspicions of British incompetence.<sup>19</sup> Wavell’s replacement by Auchinleck put Blamey back to square one, with a new British commander to school in the ‘rules’ of employing Dominion soldiers. Auchinleck, a ‘dignified and ... stolid commander’, came under immediate pressure from Churchill to achieve success in the North African theatre. Auchinleck arrived in Egypt with new ideas and the weight of expectation hanging over him. Blamey, a man described as lacking in tact,<sup>20</sup> was in a position of high responsibility. He was second only to Auchinleck, with a clear sense of his national priorities—Australian concerns that could collide with British strategy. Their respective roles clashed; their personalities did too.

Auchinleck’s decision to employ the brigade group as the primary unit for desert warfare was a thorny issue. Blamey, more determined than ever to concentrate his forces and operate not just with separate divisions, but in an Australian corps, was firmly opposed to such an approach. This brought together the issue of concentrating national forces with the debate over the ideal formation—brigade group or division—for desert warfare.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of South Africa, the Dominions sought to concentrate their forces and subsequently claimed that the concentration of forces was validated strategically by the success that divisions eventually enjoyed in the desert and beyond. Auchinleck was unconvinced because he deemed brigades the more mobile and interchangeable formation, ideal for the speed of desert warfare. The inability to concentrate Australia’s three divisions while the 9th Australian Division was besieged at Tobruk facilitated a temporary compromise, but one that was not ideal for either commander.

The struggle between the two men came to a head over Tobruk. This was an issue that exerted the sort of pressure that their relationship could not handle: it involved the national concentration of forces and these divisions’ future employment as a corps; and it involved the welfare of one nation’s soldiers as perceived by a national commander set against the overall strategic need of the empire perceived by the British

head of MEC. Informed of the deteriorating health of the Australians forming the core of Tobruk's garrison, to the point that their ability to resist a major assault was in doubt, Blamey demanded that the division be replaced. From Auchinleck's vantage point of the entire theatre under his command, the Eighth Army was gearing up for a major offensive to relieve the fortress, and he was loath to denude his stretched resources of a division that would not be replaced, since the relieved men would need a recovery period. Furthermore, any relief would have to be seaborne and the Royal Navy was already running significant risks in just supplying the port's defenders, never mind risking the extraction of a division. At a more basic level, Auchinleck claimed to lack a suitable division with which to replace the Australians and was simply unconvinced by the claim that the deterioration in health of the Australian personnel was as serious as suggested.<sup>22</sup> Auchinleck refused to withdraw the men; Blamey went over his head to Canberra, sparking the political clash.<sup>23</sup>

The story has been well documented elsewhere and does not need to be covered in depth again here, except to highlight its key features.<sup>24</sup> Churchill, admitting to Auchinleck that he was 'grieved by the Australian attitude', pleaded with three successive Australian prime ministers not to force the issue, but despite his hopes that they would 'play the game if the facts are put before them squarely', the Australian leaders would not be moved.<sup>25</sup> Indeed the whole matter, from the Australian side and for both Blamey and his government, quickly became a point of principle. The difficulty in extracting the first units from the fortress under enemy attack again called into question the whole operation for the UK, but Canberra refused to contemplate leaving the remainder of the 9th Australian Division in Tobruk despite the risks involved in its extraction. Churchill reluctantly authorised subsequent operations to replace the remaining Australian units. Auchinleck was aware that he had been effectively overruled by a man under his command and now contemplated offering his resignation, feeling that his position was no longer tenable.<sup>26</sup> He was dissuaded,<sup>27</sup> but the situation was not truly resolved until Japan's attack led to the withdrawal of two Australian Divisions from MEC, under Blamey, to the Pacific. This left behind only Leslie Morshead's 9th Australian Division—recovered from their Tobruk experience—to continue fighting in North Africa.

Unlike Blamey, Auchinleck respected Morshead as 'a fine fighter'.<sup>28</sup> When Morshead refused Auchinleck's request to use the 9th Australian Division for the attack on Miteiriya Ridge in July 1942, citing his division's

overuse in attack, the two men discussed the situation over tea. Auchinleck claimed Morshead 'had done all that had been asked and that was a great deal. He had been asked because he has a fine fighting division—the penalty for being good.'<sup>29</sup> Morshead, for his part, displayed little of Blamey's personal animosity and captured the familial Commonwealth feeling of the meeting, describing it as 'rather like a family party'.<sup>30</sup> Morshead relented and agreed to use his division in the assault, an action that represented the easier Anglo-Australian relationship once Blamey was removed from the equation.

Undoubtedly during the Tobruk incident, the overriding concern of Australia was the welfare of its men. Nevertheless the firm stand had more to it than that. Blamey's personal biases were a part of it: he always sensed that Auchinleck did not quite 'get it', as Wavell had done, over the employment of Dominion forces. Resentful of a British Army structure that overlooked Dominion commanders for promotions,<sup>31</sup> Blamey saw this as an opportunity to establish his authority. The Australian government also had significant reservations about Anglo-Dominion relations, encouraged by Blamey's messages home to Canberra. The Australian commander informed his government, for instance, that once an Australian unit was transferred to British control, getting it back was akin to 'prising open the jaws of an alligator'.<sup>32</sup> These messages hardly inspired confidence in the Australian government over Anglo-Dominion cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

Canberra's concerns over the UK's attitude began with the pressure to despatch an Australian expeditionary force to the Middle East in 1939, when Prime Minister Menzies cited London's colonial attitude towards Australia. This was an Australian perception that would die hard during the war.<sup>34</sup> During the Tobruk incident, Australia could drive home its independent power in the Anglo-Dominion relationship, a desire that found its ultimate vindication in Canberra overruling the top British commander in the field. This did not stop Churchill from suggesting to Australia what he thought was best for the Allies—such as the Australian 9th Division remaining with MEC beyond 1942—but he immediately couched such requests in terms of greater praise and deference following the Tobruk episode and more readily accepted Australia's refusal to agree.<sup>35</sup> Indeed Australia reacted more angrily at New Zealand for refusing to follow suit and bring its division back to the Pacific, than at the UK during the latter incident.<sup>36</sup>

The Tobruk episode raised resentment on both sides about Anglo-Australian cooperation in the field. Churchill told Canberra that the relief

of Australians at Tobruk was ‘being carried out in accordance with your decision which I greatly regret’,<sup>37</sup> before informing Australia of the resulting losses the extraction operation incurred, differentiating the British forces—‘our casualties’—and the Australians—‘your men’.<sup>38</sup> Such alliance problems were almost inevitably more severe in the Anglo-Australian relationship than between London and Wellington, because New Zealand, with just a single division that often operated with just two instead of three brigades, had a relatively straightforward task in concentrating its contingent. With Australia pushing for a national corps and New Zealand maintaining a single division intact, South Africa was the exception in concentrating forces.

Unlike in the cases of Freyberg and Blamey, the South African government gave no charter to its highest-ranking man in the desert, Lieutenant-General George Brink. South African commanders were therefore ostensibly required to obey orders from their British superiors in MEC, with no legal right to refer decisions they disagreed with back to Pretoria.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless Brink, and later Pienaar, maintained total control over administration, training and discipline, like their other Dominion counterparts and—though neither was authorised to challenge his superiors in MEC—both still communicated with the Union government over their concerns. This communication was, however, most frequently about internal rather than Anglo-Dominion matters.

Furthermore, despite two divisions operating in MEC, South Africa did not make the case for a South African Corps, leaving it to British commanders to employ the South African divisions as they saw fit. This they proceeded to do—in 43 days from the opening of the Crusader offensive, the 1st South African brigade went through nine British-directed changes in higher command, and it was not until May 1942 that divisional commander Dan Pienaar could proclaim, ‘This is the first time that the 1<sup>st</sup> South African ... has fought as a complete division’.<sup>40</sup>

Why was it that the only Dominion of the three to have adopted the independence gained from the Statute of Westminster, now hesitated to express the same level of independence in the desert? One influential factor for Australia and New Zealand in adopting their approach was the legacy of the Great War and the persistent national myths of British incompetence set against the abilities of their own soldiers, forged under fire at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. With only a brigade operating in France, South Africa did not suffer the same overall scale of losses that the Anzacs had under British command and, with such a small *British*

population, heroic battles like Delville Wood never gained the same traction in South African collective memory as, for instance, Vimy Ridge did in Canada.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, whereas the impact of the Great War is often linked to the exceptionally high number of deaths sustained by the combatants, South Africa alone of the Dominions suffered approximately the same number of military deaths in both world wars.<sup>42</sup> In both conflicts South Africa's loss of life was the lowest of the Dominions.

Another factor was Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Although Orpen has argued that Smuts, as a military man and politician, allowed British commanders so much power over South Africa's units to prevent 'giving rise to the type of embarrassment' that Australia's approach to command caused, higher stakes than that were involved.<sup>43</sup> Domestically Smuts' concern was his opposition—once he authorised South African forces to fight as far north as Egypt and Libya, he could not risk calamity befalling the entire contingent. Indeed, even when accepting that both divisions should operate in one *theatre*, a very large one at that, he felt that he had 'taken his fate in both hands' and subsequently would not countenance putting, as he described it, all his eggs in one basket—something a single corps would represent.<sup>44</sup>

Conversely, Smuts had less concern for South Africa's influence in imperial affairs; whereas Australia concentrated its forces in part to earn a larger say in forming strategy and pushed for a revival of the Imperial War Cabinet that had brought together British and Dominion leaders in the Great War, the South African premier remained against such plans. Smuts had a personal relationship with Churchill, commanding his respect as no other Dominion leader did.<sup>45</sup> The South African leader had military experience from the Boer War, in addition to successfully leading South African forces in Africa during the Great War. He gained acclaim in London for his role in the Imperial War Cabinet from 1917, where his military and world views were widely respected and earned him important positions, including as a key member of the committee that formally recommended the independence of the RAF as a military service. In May 1941, the UK appointed Smuts a Field Marshal of the British Army. His privileged position in Anglo-Dominion relations provided Smuts with little motivation to unite his divisions, while domestic political forces actively encouraged him to maintain separate divisions as a bulwark against catastrophic failure in any one campaign.

Yet such different Dominion approaches were the cause of occasional confusion and misunderstanding for British commanders, who could

order one Dominion's forces to act but needed agreement from the commanders of the others. Complicating matters further, despite their lack of legal recourse to Pretoria, South African officers regularly challenged the decisions of British officers and reminded their British superiors that they were representing an independent country.<sup>46</sup> On occasion, South African commanders refused to fulfil the tasks designated to their divisions.<sup>47</sup> The Commonwealth-wide uncertainty about the competence of British commanders also affected South Africans, encouraging the commanders of South Africa's two divisions to question authority and even formulate strategy for their superiors.<sup>48</sup> Pienaar encapsulated the feelings of many South Africans with his comment on the British command structure in the desert:<sup>49</sup> 'A man loses his bn [battalion] and they make him a blerry bde [brigade] Commander; he loses his bde and they make him a blerry divisional Commander. He loses his division and they make him a blerry corps Commander.'<sup>50</sup>

Although the actions of the commanders of South Africa's divisions were taken with the welfare of their soldiers in mind, it was insubordination that posed problems for the British officers supposedly in command of overall strategy. Indeed, on at least one occasion, such action resulted in Ritchie simply removing the South African division involved from his battle plan.<sup>51</sup> No doubt Auchinleck was therefore bemused after he cabled the commander of South Africa's forces in the Union, van Ryneveld, to inform him that he hoped that the two South African divisional commanders would help each other out with transport as Auchinleck suggested to them. Van Ryneveld noted tersely on the telegram that 'as 1 Div. is under his command', Auchinleck should be informed that 'orders ... are all that is required'.<sup>52</sup>

This incident was also related to one of the weaknesses of the South African system. With no corps base and accompanying headquarters, the two South African divisional staffs had little contact and were competing for the resources and reinforcements available—the latter a large and ever-growing supply problem for the Union during the desert conflict. This gave rise to a genuine divisional rivalry.<sup>53</sup>

And it was the existence of two South African divisions, so difficult to maintain with such limited white manpower in the Union,<sup>54</sup> which caused the biggest conflict between British and South African commanders.<sup>55</sup> The British encouraged South African divisions to operate on a two-brigade basis, as the New Zealand division was doing when necessary.<sup>56</sup> Auchinleck fumed that three brigades was 'simply ... not going to work,

IF they are going to fight. If they aren't going to fight, they are of no use to me!<sup>57</sup> The two-brigade approach was adopted, but South African commanders were never comfortable with this formation, fearing that it stripped them of flexibility in battle.<sup>58</sup> The under-strength divisions with inadequate reinforcements meant Auchinleck, who felt compelled to write directly to Smuts several times on the subject,<sup>59</sup> considered that he could only use South Africans in roles where they were heavily backed up by supporting units and unlikely to sustain losses—hardly ideal for the head of an undermanned command.<sup>60</sup>

Even South African reports noted that Pienaar in particular would refuse the use of the 1st South African Division where he felt that significant casualties would be incurred. This often complicated ostensibly basic operations by bringing in other units because he believed in 'spreading the loss', an approach that often led to 'delay and lack of co-ordination'.<sup>61</sup> This was another problem of the alliance army: manpower had to be used along national lines and reinforcements were rarely shared across these national demarcations, restricting flexibility with the limited manpower that MEC actually had.<sup>62</sup> Shortages persisted for the Union's units, until the long-mooted conversion of South African divisions to less manpower-intensive armoured formations facilitated a South African armoured division to sustain operations in Italy from 1944. Nevertheless the ability to use the Union's divisions piecemeal meant that, regardless of the complications and British grumblings, South Africans saw persistent action on the front. At the conclusion of the summer battles of 1942, for instance, the 1st South African Division was deemed exhausted in British reports, after almost eight continuous months of use on the frontline.<sup>63</sup>

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## A Curious Absence? Canada and the Desert War

The one Dominion not present throughout the desert war was Canada. Despite being the first of the overseas British nations to get a division to the UK before the end of 1939, the Canadian Army did not participate in many combat roles prior to 1943.<sup>1</sup> After this, its ground contribution was truly substantial. Canadian soldiers were involved in the invasion of Sicily and then fought in the Italian theatre, because Ottawa allowed its well-trained Canadian Corps, developed in the UK from 1939, to be broken up for these offensives. There followed an impressive and substantial role at Normandy, leading to a sustained campaign in north-west Europe, conducted concurrently with operations in Italy. Why did the other three Dominions fight doggedly in the desert for two years while Canadians saw only brief action, only for Canadians to both fight cooperatively alongside South Africans and New Zealanders in Italy, as well as form the only significant Dominion army contribution to the decisive operations in north-west Europe from 1944? Was this not a curious pattern?

Prime Minister King saw Canada's place as alongside the UK. When London narrowly averted war during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, King stated in a private conversation with an Anglophile cabinet minister that following the mother country into war was 'a self-evident national duty' for Canadians.<sup>2</sup> Despite his refusal to make any imperial defence commitments in advance of declaring war, King sanctioned his naval forces to participate in Admiralty plans to the fullest extent once war broke out;

he negotiated firmly over the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan yet accepted that his country would play the major Commonwealth role in air training; and he had a Canadian Army division in the UK by the end of 1939, ready to fight in France by the summer of 1940. The Canadians then formed an important part of the front-line defence in the UK, ready for any attempted German invasion.<sup>3</sup> By the end of 1940, because of British success in the Battle of Britain, this invasion seemed increasingly unlikely. By the summer of 1941, due to German moves in south-east Europe, North Africa and, massively, into the Soviet Union, the prospect of a surprise attempt at an invasion of the UK was all but eliminated. At no point did Ottawa or London push for Canada to move units to the North African theatre, however, despite the persistent build-up of forces there and the perceived difficulties that the lack of a sustained combat role for the Canadian Army was expected to create in other Anglo-Dominion relationships.<sup>4</sup>

The major reason for Canada not participating in the desert was King, who went to Machiavellian lengths to keep Canadians out of sustained ground operations. The most important motivation for his rearguard action against this role was his consistent paranoia about the possibility of another conscription crisis in Canada, which would threaten the unity of Anglo- and French-Canadians.<sup>5</sup> King's reputation in Quebec was not just as an anti-conscription prime minister, but also as anti-war;<sup>6</sup> and his refusal to commit anything to imperial defence planning in advance of a declaration of war—a declaration that he insisted could only be made by agreement of the Canadian Parliament—was part of a consistent policy aimed at bringing his country into the war with as much unity as possible, if it were to happen at all.

King believed that by privileging a large naval and air effort, he could control the extent to which the Canadian Army was involved in combat operations, thus preventing heavy and unrelenting casualties of the sort that typified the Great War. He feared that ground operations would cause the most severe rate of casualties, a rate that would inspire the divided populations of Canada to compare enlistment statistics and demand equality of participation in the war effort—in short, an argument for conscription. Thus King oversaw instead a dramatic increase in the Canadian Navy, from six vessels to 365, facilitating its indispensable role in defending North Atlantic convoys. Equally impressive, the BCATP was centred around a Canadian effort so large that in negotiations King could insist on making

a public declaration that proclaimed that air training would form Canada's greatest contribution to the war. He was quick to sanction a Canadian Division for the UK—even allowing it to proceed to France—but beyond the 1st Canadian Division, the extent of the Canadian Army's contribution remained undefined. King's pre-emptive emphasis on the naval and air effort gave the Canadian premier leverage in negotiations with London, as well as a war contribution to placate Canadian Anglophiles; with this strategy, he sought to prevent Canada from being sucked into another unrelenting call for manpower such as the country had experienced in 1914–18. The fall of France—and the temporary suspension of a western front—allowed King to circumscribe the role of the Canadian Army and its overseas actions further to garrisoning the British mainland.

In a September 1940 paper, 'Canada's Military Effort during the next Year', the Canadian Chiefs of Staff identified Egypt as a possible land theatre for deployment of the Canadian Army.<sup>7</sup> There were few dissenting voices, however, when King explained to his Cabinet War Committee colleagues in October that 'naval and air assistance overseas ... constituted Canada's most appropriate and natural contributions to the common cause'. Responding to the suggestion of a North African role for the Canadian Army, King warned that, 'The Canadian public was not inclined to accept with enthusiasm the sending of Canadian soldiers to new and distant scenes of operations. The British Isles were, of course, in a different category.'<sup>8</sup> King further noted in his diary that Canada could not act without reference to the USA, which in its current state of neutrality was mainly concerned with home defence. While he sensed that powerful Anglophiles in the military and his cabinet were pushing for a larger army role, King was confident that the CWC had accepted his preference for air and naval roles.<sup>9</sup>

Two months later, the voices calling for the Canadian Army to see action had grown stronger. A Canadian newspaper report, later found to have been a 'shot in the dark' by a journalist,<sup>10</sup> suggested that the UK was about to ask for a Canadian Army commitment to the North African theatre. Some cabinet ministers now predicted the deployment of the Canadian Army would be a topic of serious contention in Canada.<sup>11</sup> Responding in the CWC, King raised further arguments to defend his position. He cautioned the imperial-minded ministers that pushing too hard for Canadian commitments across the empire could undermine the strength of the Commonwealth by heightening the Canadian public's

‘North American sentiment’—perhaps reflecting his own notion of Canada’s place in the world. At this point, he finally expressed his overriding fear of conscription to his colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

The CWC was not as easily dissuaded in this meeting, and several cabinet members now lined up to argue the case for a commitment to the North African theatre. The arguments in favour of deploying the Canadian Army to MEC were explained by four members of the CWC: Germany should be attacked wherever possible; Canadian troops were suffering a loss of morale due to inactivity; the Canadian public would not welcome a refusal to fight in an active theatre; and, finally, in a rebuttal to King’s anti-imperialist sentiment, the prime minister was informed ‘We are all on the same team, and should play the part most likely to lead to common victory.’<sup>13</sup>

So strong and persistent were these calls that King reluctantly agreed in the CWC to send a message to the Minister for National Defence Colonel James Ralston, then in London, authorising him to discuss the possibility of a Canadian Army role in North Africa. Crucially, however, King secured agreement in the CWC to a proviso that the reasons given for this deployment must be compelling. The subsequent memorandum, drafted by the nationalist head of the Department of External Affairs Oscar Skelton and approved by King,<sup>14</sup> laid overwhelming emphasis on the rider, while the arguments *for* such a commitment were omitted altogether. Its key section read that:

It is pretty certain to be felt that if troops are being sent to the Near East they should be sent from parts of [the] Commonwealth which control policy in the Near East or which are more geographically concerned with [the] Near East ... It is one thing for Canada to raise additional forces to assist Britain in [the] British Isles or in Western Europe, it might become a very different thing to get the support necessary for Canadian forces to be sent to other parts of world.<sup>15</sup>

This was definitely not in the spirit of the message agreed by the CWC.

This reticent memorandum successfully stalled progress towards the use of the Canadian Army in North Africa, providing Ralston with an unmistakable insight into King’s position on the issue. The CWC was not so easily diverted, and in May 1941 King was seriously challenged on the topic once more. His colleagues again suggested that a lack of action was hurting the morale of Canadian forces, but this time crucially added that this was affecting recruitment in Canada. Not everyone in King’s CWC

was as concerned about conscription as the prime minister,<sup>16</sup> and this was a subtle attempt to invoke King's conscription fears by suggesting that the belated deployment of the Canadian Army could quickly trigger a volunteer crisis, because enthusiasm for the ground service was gradually ebbing away while the public perceived it as sitting idle. The idea of sending a single brigade to North Africa was mooted, but King (and his opponents in the debate) probably recognised that this would be the thin end of the wedge. King protested vehemently that he could not 'justify, merely on the grounds of arousing public sentiment, any proposal which might involve the loss of life', adding disingenuously that it was well known in the UK that Canadians could be used wherever they were most needed.<sup>17</sup>

Once again King's colleagues ostensibly won the debate; once more the prime minister misled them. The Canadian leader reluctantly agreed to inform London of his 'government's willingness to consider other employment for Canadian overseas formations, for example, in the Middle East'. King then took matters into his own hands—after drafting the message, all records and accounts suggest that he not only failed to send it, but that he also declined to inform his colleagues of this change of heart.<sup>18</sup>

These were bold steps from a prime minister normally careful to have his cabinet's consensus when taking action. While most accounts correctly place particular emphasis on King's fear of a conscription crisis as the reason for his single-handed sabotage of a North African commitment, the often unacknowledged peripheral arguments are not without weight. The letter to Ralston and King's (private) references to the USA reflected how he now perceived Canada's role in the world. This was less of an *imperial* position and more as the bridge between the UK and the USA,<sup>19</sup> the two forces balancing each other and public feeling in Canada. He was aware that the North American sentiment he cited as prevalent in Canada was well ahead of current public opinion,<sup>20</sup> but he was nevertheless willing to push such thinking to hyperbolic lengths to fend off those he deemed imperially-minded.<sup>21</sup> As well as revealing King's view of Canada in the world, this also reflected his attempts to anticipate shifts in public sentiment, based on his own preoccupations.

Conscription fears and Canada's world role made for compelling arguments in King's mind. It seems, however, that he harboured a further personal bias not mentioned in other accounts. This was, in essence, a lack of faith in the ability of British forces to stop any German attack in Africa or the Middle East. In October 1940, King first mentioned that he felt 'increasingly conscious of how ill prepared, Britain is, to wage a campaign

that can be other than unsuccessful in the Near East and Africa'. Later in the same diary entry, the Canadian premier further noted how he had done well to avoid committing Canadians to 'fantastic or ill-directed adventures'.<sup>22</sup> The next day he added that he would 'be amazed if ... Britain will be able to save Egypt or to hold her own in the Mediterranean'.<sup>23</sup> To utter such opinions in the CWC would undoubtedly have opened King up to intense criticism, and he appears to have wisely kept his own counsel on these thoughts. Nevertheless, it is striking that King eventually sanctioned the use of the Canadian Army in a sustained ground operation only when imperial forces were consistently winning, but during earlier campaigns when success was more doubtful, he held back his ground forces and privately confided in his diary the lack of faith he had in British power.

This opinion, which King shared with many others in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, likewise stemmed from the Dominions' pessimistic assessment of the UK's command and strategy that emerged from the Great War. King saw in North Africa a British stand—an 'ill-directed adventure'—that would end in calamity, costing countless Canadian lives if he allowed the Canadian Army to get involved. By April 1941, with the disaster of Greece and Rommel rampaging through the desert in mind, King wrote about the 'very critical situation in Europe and North Africa', commenting, 'I confess it is all pretty much as I saw it in my mind'.<sup>24</sup> Here was vindication for his decision to keep Canadians out of the grasp of MEC. Nor was it just in Canada or only the First World War legacy that created such doubts in British leadership: when Australia demanded that its troops be removed from the Tobruk garrison, Churchill admitted that 'the Australian Government had little reason to feel confidence at this time in British direction of the war'.<sup>25</sup> King shared these sentiments but, by successfully blocking the deployment of Canadian soldiers to North Africa, he avoided the consequences.

This was just one side of the story. Wary due to the tough negotiating stance of King and his ministers early in the war over many issues, including wheat imports and the BCATP, the UK never challenged Canada's position on North Africa. Through Canadian correspondence with representatives in the UK, such as King's disingenuous message to Ralston, the WO was led to believe that the Canadian Army was 'not available' to join MEC and thus did not pursue this avenue.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Churchill was primarily concerned with North African operations and had, since the autumn of 1940, signalled his intention to build up substantial imperial forces in that theatre. In December he informed Menzies that he was



‘planning to gather a very large army representing the whole Empire ... in the Middle East’.<sup>27</sup> The British premier harried Smuts into moving his forces north to the Mediterranean coast and compelled New Zealand and Australia to send and then maintain divisions in the North African theatre. Why was Canada not included in Churchill’s vast imperial army blueprint?

King noted in his diary that in one discussion in August 1941, the British premier suggested that Canadians were not suited to the desert climate,<sup>28</sup> but it is likely other considerations were more prominent in his thinking. Stacey has established that one of Churchill’s motivations for keeping Canadians out of North Africa was his awareness that the UK’s continuous use of Dominion troops had been feeding the Nazi propaganda machine.<sup>29</sup> Reports emanating from Germany that the British were having their ‘chestnuts pulled from the fire’ by the Dominions certainly pricked Churchill’s mind;<sup>30</sup> he and other key figures in London were worried that such unceasing use of Dominion units would have repercussions in the Dominions and on world opinion.<sup>31</sup> Churchill wrote to Auchinleck in September 1941, claiming to have ‘long feared the dangerous reactions on Australian and world opinion of our seeming to fight all our battles in the Middle East only with Dominion troops’.<sup>32</sup> This was one reason to not tip the Anglo-Dominion balance in the desert further away from the UK.

The actual role that the Canadian Army was playing on the frontline of British defence cannot be ignored either. In his memoirs Churchill asked outright ‘how far could we denude our home and citadel for the sake of the Middle East?’<sup>33</sup> With Canadians forming at one point the best-trained division in home defence, this was a pertinent question. As time progressed, however, the threat receded and this reasoning became less compelling. Churchill continually reassured King that the Canadian Army role was of great service to the UK,<sup>34</sup> but even here he could not avoid comparing this garrison role to the active fighting role of the other Dominions. Churchill noted that while ‘no greater service could be rendered to the UK’, the Canadians were bound to be ‘envious of other Dominions’ involved in action.<sup>35</sup>

Yet perhaps a larger reason predominated in Churchill’s mind when keeping the Canadians close at hand. The British leader was prone to wild and extravagant ideas; he was a man of action. He perceived British grand strategy as a plan to wear down the Reich through the blockade and bomber strategy, fight concentric battles around the periphery of Nazi territory and finally combine continental landings with uprisings by the conquered populations of Europe to defeat Hitler. In this last phase, even

outnumbered British troops with an overwhelming material and air power advantage could advance upon an exhausted Germany. The Canadians, meanwhile, had been marked out as crack troops in the Great War,<sup>36</sup> and while the Canadian Army was garrisoning the UK in 1940–3, British planners earmarked the Canadian units for numerous expeditionary roles: in Norway, France, Dieppe, even the Azores.

Was Churchill holding the Canadians back for the role of peripheral assaults, in the hopes of fulfilling his grand strategy? In their private conversation of August 1941, Churchill suggested as much to King. Employing a typically Churchillian phrase, the British prime minister advised King that a key role could soon open up for the Canadian Army, in which they might help to ‘roll the map down from the top’.<sup>37</sup> On the only occasion when British planners eventually employed the Canadian Army in a raid, at Dieppe in August 1942, the results were disastrous due to poor British planning, and this made London more cautious than ever over the roles it suggested for the Canadians.<sup>38</sup> Churchill’s peripheral strategy as he perceived it did not come to pass and the Canadian Army remained in the UK; but when Churchill’s plans found more limited expression in the attack on the ‘soft-underbelly’ of Europe (Italy), the Canadian Army was employed.

Therefore both Churchill and King had substantial motivations to keep the Canadian Army out of the North African theatre. Predominantly this prevention was engineered by King, who out-manoeuvred his CWC and the WO. For his part, Churchill never used his position to apply any external pressure. By 1943 the situation had changed dramatically. The USA had been in the war for over 12 months and grand strategy was now formulated between London and Washington. From a conquered North Africa, the Allies decided to invade Sicily, then Italy itself. A large-scale continental invasion across the English Channel was also on the horizon, with just the date left to settle. When the Normandy landings came, the well-trained Canadians were present in great number.

Indeed all of the arguments that King had previously applied to keep the Canadian Army out of action now unravelled. The war was no longer being fought over, and in, European colonies; the war for Europe was back on. King consistently argued that Canada’s place was beside (and between) the UK and the USA, and Canada’s major allies were now planning a joint invasion of Italy and France. The string of defeats that worried King and undermined his faith in the ability of British command and imperial forces to hold on in the Mediterranean was over, and now

the Canadian Army would join victorious Anglo-American forces. The Allies were increasingly on the offensive—the prospect of final victory was starting to glimmer in the distance—and King needed to keep in mind Canada's voice in the post-war empire and North America. On committing the Canadian Army to its first major land campaign, he felt that:

Everything considered, it is perhaps all for the best. I can see that the Canadian people and perhaps the Americans, Australians and New Zealanders and others would wrongly construe Canadians remaining out of action for another whole year. Some of them at least will now become part of the invasion of Europe from the South and have their association with the Middle East campaign.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this, the spectre of conscription remained in King's decision-making. With the Great War and Dieppe in mind, he contemplated the repercussions of a role in Sicily and Italy. For all the negative aspects of the Canadian Army fighting a sustained campaign, King recognised one pertinent point—any involvement in the Mediterranean theatre now would reduce the size of the Canadian contingent invading France.<sup>40</sup> The prime minister confided to his diary that he was sure the Italian theatre would be less intense and thus, with a substantial amount of manpower committed there, Canada might avoid catastrophic losses in north-west Europe.<sup>41</sup> King lost his personal war against conscription but his machinations before 1943, and the faster than expected conclusion to the war, meant that few conscripted Canadians ever saw action and the country did not divide over the issue to the same extent as in 1917.

## NOTES

1. A quickly-overwhelmed garrison at Hong Kong (December 1941) and the disastrous Dieppe raid (August 1942) were the extremely unfortunate British decisions in employing Canadian Army units prior to this date.
2. 13 September 1938, MG26-J13. See also, J.L. Granatstein & R. Bothwell, "A Self-Evident National Duty": Canadian Foreign Policy, 1935–39, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2, 2 (1975), 212–233.
3. 'Employment of the Canadian Army Overseas, December 1939 – June 1940', MG 27 III B II, vol. 45.

4. Bruce to Curtin, 9 December 1941, AWM54, 339/1/4.
5. J.L. Granatstein and J. M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto, 1977).
6. 'War 1935–1936', MG26-K, R11336-1-9-E, Microfilm reel M-1497, p. 539522.
7. C.G.S. Appreciation – 'What should be the Nature of Canada's Military Effort during the next year?', 25 September 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II.
8. CWC meeting, 1 October 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II.
9. 1 October 1940, MG26-J13.
10. Ralston to King, 9 Dec 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II.
11. Power to Ralston, 6 December 1940, MG 27 III B II, vol. 45.
12. CWC meeting, 4 December 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II.
13. CWC meeting, 4 December 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II.
14. 4 December 1940, MG26-J13. For Skelton, see N. Hillmer, *OD Skelton: A Portrait of Canadian Ambition* (Toronto, 2015).
15. King to Ralston, 6 Dec 1940, RG-2-7-C, vol. II. See also C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 40.
16. CWC meeting, 2 October 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. V.
17. CWC meeting, 20 May 1941, RG-2-7-C, vol. IV.
18. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, pp. 41–42.
19. 4 December 1940, MG26-J13.
20. 9 October 1940, MG26-J13.
21. 4 December 1940, MG26-J13.
22. 9 October 1940, MG26-J13.
23. 10 October 1940, MG26-J13.
24. 22 April 1941, MG26-J13.
25. W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. III: The Grand Alliance* (London, 1950), p. 372. For South Africa, see W.K. Hancock, *Smuts, Vol. II: The Fields of Force 1919–1950* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 374.
26. C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939–45: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa, 1948), p. 47.
27. W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. II: Their Finest Hour* (London, 1949), pp. 442, 541.
28. 2 October 1941, MG26-J13.
29. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, p. 41.
30. J.P. Bourke, 'The Australian Soldier as Others See Him, Part II: The Second AIF', MSS0710, W2. See also C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of*

- War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa, 1955), p. 323.
31. Sir John Kennedy, *The Business of War: The War Narrative of Major-General Sir John Kennedy* (London, 1957), p. 97.
  32. Churchill, *Second World War, III*, pp. 368–9.
  33. Churchill, *Second World War, II*, p. 374.
  34. Churchill to King, 12 September 1940, DO 35/1003/1.
  35. Stacey, *Canadian Army*, p. 46.
  36. D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George, Vol. VI* (London, 1936), p. 3368.
  37. 23 August 1941, MG26-J13.
  38. R. Atkin, *Dieppe 1942: The Jubilee Disaster* (London, 1980); D. Whitaker & S. Whitaker, *Dieppe: Tragedy to Triumph* (London, 1992); B.L. Villa, *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid* (Oxford, 1989).
  39. 24 April 1943, MG26-J13.
  40. For more on this campaign, see D.E. Delaney, ‘Co-operation in the Anglo-Canadian Armies, 1939–1945’ in K. Neilson & G. Kennedy (eds), *Britain, Power and the International System, 1856–1956: Festschrift in Honour of David French* (London, 2009). See also, T. Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944–1945* (Toronto, 2006).
  41. 31 August 1943, MG26-J13.

## CONCLUSION

The Dominion contribution was nothing less than essential to British victory in the desert. Forming the infantry core of MEC, the Dominions provided an effort that the UK complemented with all the necessary services, guns and armour to fashion an effective fighting force. Nevertheless the desert war presented many problems to the Commonwealth alliance.

Any comparison between the South African, Australian and New Zealand approach to command in North Africa is complicated by the fact that each had different responsibilities and problems. Blamey's job was probably the hardest, balancing the task of trying to concentrate three divisions with his role as both Auchinleck's deputy and liaison to a home government insecure about its independence. All three Dominions, however, experienced difficulties in their relationship within the Eighth Army and the different approaches—charters or not—suited what each government hoped to achieve. It should be noted that even where the UK got closest to the desired level of power in command, over South Africans, problems nevertheless manifested themselves.

Tensions were raised in all the Anglo-Dominion relationships because defeats often reversed hard-earned advances and explanations were sought for these losses. Yet for more than two long years the Dominions fought and suffered with the Eighth Army, in a period when ultimate triumph in the theatre was far from certain. Forming the infantry core of a crucial imperial army, whose success was of great strategic and political importance to London, the Dominions fought the critical battles of 1940–2 in North Africa that ensured that the British position in the Middle East

was maintained until victory could be achieved. More than anything else it should be remembered that this was an alliance of four independent nations working within an even more diversified army that avoided a complete breakdown and, with all four members represented, won a decisive victory at Alamein. Churchill said that for any man who was challenged on his contribution in the Second World War, it would be sufficient to answer that he had ‘marched and fought with the desert army’.<sup>1</sup> For the three southern Dominions too, this was answer enough.

## NOTE

1. W.S. Churchill, *Never Give In!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches* (London, 2003), p. 348.

## CONCLUSION

Churchill loftily remarked of the Anglo-Dominion relationship: ‘It was their duty to study their own position with concentrated attention. We had to try to think for all.’<sup>1</sup> The UK was at the head of the Commonwealth alliance, the imperial centre around which the Dominions rallied in 1939. As Churchill presented matters, the UK formulated grand strategy and coordinated the effort of its empire to fight around the globe. The historiography has largely followed Churchill’s approach: the UK is often used synonymously with the British Empire and histories of the Dominions at war are mainly national. For these reasons, it is unsurprising that the sheer importance of the Dominions to British triumph is forgotten, subsumed into a wider imperial effort or rather too easily underplayed in narratives of the conflict. Yet through a substantive and pervasive contribution to the war, the Dominions were essential to British victory. Explaining this role has important implications for understanding the Second World War, British imperial power and alliance warfare.

The preceding chapters demonstrate the areas in which the Dominion contribution was indispensable to the UK. This was not simply in one specific field or through one form of contribution—the case studies pervade the British war effort, from finance to the battlefield, displaying how crucial the Dominions truly were. The Dominions consistently underwrote British strategy: financing essential purchases and providing indispensable imports; training airmen, when air power was the UK’s main offensive weapon; protecting maritime supply to the UK and imperial battlefields, when these links were seriously threatened; and finally confronting the



enemy on the battlefield, when the UK lacked combat manpower. The extent of the Dominion effort was so great, and the cooperation of the Commonwealth so close, that the war effort imposed considerable stress on the evolving Anglo-Dominion relationships. This strain of war altered the nature of the Commonwealth alliance from matriarchal to fraternal. Yet, the victorious partnership that emerged from the war maintained its importance to both the UK and the Dominions. After discussing the themes of the book and what they say about the Dominion role in British victory, I will draw some broader conclusions.

### THE DOMINIONS AND BRITISH VICTORY: EXTENT AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DOMINION EFFORT

For victory, the Dominions' primary importance was in providing additional manpower for the conflict, most crucially in the years 1940–3. In a military and economic sense, historians have suggested that the Dominions stood apart from the rest of the empire due to the importance of their manpower to the UK.<sup>2</sup> As I have shown, this manpower was so vital because it was largely used in combat roles. In the relationship established in the Boer War and consolidated in the Great War, men from the Dominions volunteered to fight for, and alongside, the UK's forces; yet this was a symbiotic relationship, because the Dominions could only provide such sizeable frontline forces by relying on the UK for rearward services. This made the Dominion contribution disproportionately large in battle. Thus, in Part 2, we see that while the UK was providing the majority of ground crews, the Dominions provided 41 per cent of aircrews that graduated from all British air training schemes across the globe, and some 46 per cent of the pilots. The roles these men subsequently took in combat were important to victory, including a large portion that participated in Bomber Command, one of the most dangerous occupations of the war.<sup>3</sup> The Dominions absorbed the resulting casualties, just as they took heavy casualties in North Africa on the battlefield (Part 4), while the UK provided most of the supporting units in Middle East Command. The Dominions were essential to British victory because they provided indispensable combat manpower that greatly increased imperial fighting strength, absorbing substantial casualties that the UK could ill afford to take itself.

The nature of Dominion manpower involved more than its number or even its disproportionate combatant role. Crucially, it was perceived, in

the Dominions and by the UK, as overwhelmingly European—but mainly British. Why did this matter? For the UK, the racial hierarchy of empire persisted in tacit assumptions, if no longer explicit doctrine. The UK drew soldiers from specific areas of the empire based on beliefs about ‘martial races’, the same convictions that privileged Gurkhas as fighting forces over other imperial subjects or that drew Indian Army soldiers mainly from eastern and northern regions of the subcontinent. At the top of this hierarchy was the British ‘race’. Racial prejudices were apparent across the Commonwealth with a direct impact on how the war was fought: for instance, the RAF only let a small number of non-whites participate as aircrews despite the pressing need for air strength (Part 2), and South Africa would not arm its non-white troops despite a chronic shortage of combat manpower (Part 4).<sup>4</sup> The UK and Dominion governments allowed white Dominion men to embrace the increasingly technological elements of warfare, whereas other populations were not encouraged to do the same, most notably Indians who were employed as ground troops, but only in tiny comparative numbers in naval and air forces. In part, this reflected the fact that technology could be a tool of subjugation; at least, this was one of many examples where the cooperative *imperial* relationship of the Commonwealth differed from the *colonial* empire. As a European imperial power, the UK spurned the opportunity of employing its vast colonial manpower reserves to significantly bolster air and naval forces because it had substantial European—and mainly British—manpower reserves provided by the Dominions.

In the settler-societies, there was considerable insecurity over ownership of the sparsely populated settled land and the racial composition of the populations. British identity was prevalent and consistently perceived as under threat: from non-British settlers, from local nationalisms, from invasion by non-British powers, and even, with the UK under threat of defeat, by the war itself stripping Dominions of their mother country. The cultural bonds with the UK were a significant factor in motivating Dominion men to fight the war.

In Canada, there was little opposition to directing its naval effort to the Atlantic and becoming a specialised force tasked with ensuring that supplies reached the UK (Part 3); however, suggestions of any commitment in the Pacific Theatre after victory in Europe were much more problematic.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, despite their government’s push for Canadianisation, Canadian airmen were not overwhelmingly in favour of being demarcated into national squadrons *even within the RAF*, the UK’s air force (Part 2).

This indicated the close affinity that many Canadians had with the UK, but a weaker connection with the empire. A theme we see in every section is that the Anglo-Dominion bonds were of significant importance to Ottawa, more so than any sense of empire or, to a lesser extent, even relations with the Commonwealth.

In the other Dominions, Britishness was more of an imperial phenomenon. As I demonstrate in Part 2 and briefly in my discussion of the financial importance of the empire to the Union in Part 1, the imperial connection provided opportunities for South Africa to expand its economy and extend its influence in sub-Saharan Africa. The Dominion's Britishness was tempered by its small English-speaking population, but its Commonwealth membership was considered by some (most influentially, Smuts) as the key to its security, economy and growing influence in African and world affairs. Being a part of the British world provided South Africa with its own imperial prospects in southern Africa, where it was largely surrounded by British colonies and even its own mandates were secured through its imperial involvement in the Great War. Although Smuts played down the imperial element of the war (as noted, for instance, in Part 4 when agreeing to send South African troops to Egypt) to placate Afrikaners, the Union's loose definition of regional defence extended to its own imperial region, arguably far beyond its immediate regional interests. This imperial definition of regional defence included the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, an imperial nexus.

South Africa trained airmen for the RAF and SAAF independently, rather than within the Commonwealth scheme, due to national and regional political considerations. A large number of these airmen subsequently served in Africa and the Middle East (Part 2). In Part 3 we see the Union's importance in functioning as a replacement for the Suez imperial connection, in addition to sending naval forces to the Mediterranean; and in Part 4, I describe how South African troops fought in Egypt and Libya for the British Empire. Eventually an armoured division fought in Italy, highlighting how Pretoria's conception of regional participation had its boundary—I argue a shared imperial-regional boundary—in the Mediterranean area. With such a small British-originated population, it is not surprising that South Africa's Britishness was conceived imperially, at least from above, and not as mainly an Anglo-Dominion bilateral relationship. Nevertheless, cultural ties did matter on an individual level: the best estimates of enlistment into the South African military forces show that English-speaking South Africans were disproportionately well-represented

(Part 4), and this excludes those that directly joined the UK's forces on the outbreak of war, such as members of the RNVF (SA) (Part 3).

Australia and New Zealand lay between these conceptions of Britishness: its importance was undoubtedly in the Anglo-Dominion bilateral connections, but the 'British world' was influential too. The explanation for this interpretation lies in the combination of the largely homogeneously British populations in the Pacific Dominions with their geographic position so far from the centre of imperial power, the UK. The Pacific Dominions had a stake in British world power because it provided them with national security against what transpired to be the genuine threat of attack from aggressors in Asia. The imperial connection provided them with a greater voice in Pacific and international affairs. In Part 2, I argue that New Zealand was the Dominion most willing to be absorbed into the wider imperial scheme of air training, something that largely held true with its naval and ground forces, evaluated in Parts 3 and 4, as well.

Australia's position was more fluid: initially it engaged in air training to a large extent (although this was in part because it lacked facilities to train enough airmen at home—discussed in Part 2), in addition to sending naval forces to the Mediterranean (Part 3) and army divisions to North Africa (Part 4). Australian airmen who trained in Canada largely joined the RAF and fought the war in Europe, while naval and ground forces fought for the imperial position in the Mediterranean and Suez Canal. This neatly captured Australia's joint interests in supporting the UK directly and ensuring that it remained connected to the mother country by maintaining British imperial power in the empire. Although Japan's early successes led to the reorientation of Australia's effort to the Pacific Theatre because it faced the possibility of direct invasion, in the RAF Australians continued to provide a direct contribution to British victory in Europe. This reflected the fact that the UK could no longer guarantee Australian security: the Anglo-Dominion cultural Britishness connection was not damaged, but the importance of the British world to Australia was temporarily, although very greatly, reduced.

Different Dominion conceptions of Britishness and national identity are considered in Part 2 in the discussion of identity within the RAF: Canada was insistent on bilateral Anglo-Dominion negotiations to provide national forces that were distinctive within the RAF; Australia, and to a much greater extent New Zealand, were more inclined to pursue collective Commonwealth negotiations and less forceful in insisting on national identification that demarcated countries within the RAF's

cosmopolitan forces. Britishness mattered in the Dominions; it was one motivation behind the size of their efforts, facilitating a contribution sufficient to make the Dominions crucial to victory. In turn, the UK's perception of the Dominions as British nations ensured that London privileged the Commonwealth's military contribution over that of other imperial nations. In the Dominions, Britishness from below helps to explain the extent of the enlistment of volunteers, who represented the majority of the 2.5 million service personnel in Dominion armed forces. This supports Darwin's argument that the British Dominions were so important to British world power because of the 'remarkable loyalty of the "overseas British"', which made them 'the most reliable ... part of the whole British world system'.<sup>6</sup> To varying extents the Dominion governments also perceived the maintenance of the British world as crucial to the future welfare of their own countries, a belief that drove and shaped the Dominion contribution to war. These factors set the Dominions drastically apart from the colonial empire in actions and perceptions: Belich wrote that 'the Dominions fought for Britain as though they co-owned it',<sup>7</sup> a collective 'Britishness' perceived by the UK; whereas, as we see in Part 2, the RAF was willing to reject a capable Indian pilot on the basis that his 'heart [was] not in the war'.<sup>8</sup>

British identity was one connection born from the metropole and settler-colony history. There were more tangible connections that went beyond national identity or membership in the imperial structure. Throughout this book I demonstrate that these links were essential to the Dominion role in British victory. Financially, the existing Anglo-Dominion connections involved a significant amount of Dominion debt that, during the war, underwrote their financial contributions to the UK; these same connections additionally provided the economic framework (particularly the sterling area) through which Dominion financial assistance was made (Part 1). The twentieth-century development of Dominion military forces that were designed to cooperate with the UK's, mainly by using British training methods and equipment—something we see in Parts 2, 3 and 4—facilitated the level of cooperation that allowed the Dominions to play such crucial combat roles once war broke out. South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders participated directly under British command in North Africa, while each Dominion provided airmen that participated as part of the RAF. In Part 3, I show that naval forces also cooperated closely and that the Dominions were willing to take on the maritime roles that allowed the Royal Navy to focus its own efforts elsewhere. The legacy

of closely connected economies and military services was instrumental in helping the Dominions provide the contribution they did to British victory.

A final theme that runs throughout this analysis is the importance of the Commonwealth's geographic reach. The global nature of the alliance facilitated the roles each Dominion played. In Part 2, we see that the Dominions all had skies free from significant enemy threat, a fact that made them ideal locations for air training. Canada's proximity to the UK was a main reason for its position as the major centre of training. This North American location also provided the basis for Canada's essential role in escorting merchant ships, often carrying American supplies, across the Atlantic, to and from the UK. Similarly, South Africa's geographic position allowed it to become an imperial shipping hub. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were all keenly interested in British victory in North Africa for national reasons, partly based on their relative geographic positions and the Mediterranean/Suez Canal's role as a communications artery of empire. The global nature of the Commonwealth was an important factor that shaped the contribution of the Dominions.

If the preceding points were the factors that facilitated the Dominion role in victory, what do the case studies show were the limiting factors in the Dominion contribution? Most of these limitations are parallel to those that made the Dominion role so important. The most obvious was a lack of resources, primarily manpower. Men in the Dominions enlisted in great numbers, a great proportion of their population, yet these populations were small: approximately 31 million (22 million white) to the UK's 46.5 million. By contrast, India, with a population of around 315 million, roughly matched the manpower contribution of the Dominions. The lack of manpower largely constricted the roles that the Dominions fulfilled to combat only, maintaining their dependence on the UK to provide support roles, something that ensured continued cooperation and gave London leverage in Anglo-Dominion negotiations, as we see in Parts 2 and 4.

The cultural connections had their limits too. Domestic politics limited the freedom of Dominion government action. Even though much of this analysis suggests that pro-British cultural sentiment was primarily a force from below, these restrictions were not solely caused by non-British populations. In Part 1, we see that an overestimation on the Canadian government's part of the willingness of Canadians to support the UK altruistically—a public perception of the Billion Dollar Gift that persisted despite the reality of its practical benefits to Canada—led to a necessary

repackaging of aid when providing future support. The limited British population of South Africa reduced the importance of Britishness in South African politics. Although the cultural connection inspired the disproportionate enlistment of men who identified as British to the armed forces, it was the practical benefits of membership in the British world that formed Pretoria's policies. The Union's key efforts were thus determined by national gain—for instance, the development of harbour facilities examined in Part 3, which supported the imperial war effort while simultaneously improving the Union's infrastructure, partly at the UK's expense.

Australia provides a striking example of the conflict between national and imperial identities. Alongside New Zealand, Australia demonstrated great commitment to the imperial elements of the war before Japan entered the conflict. When home defence in the Pacific Theatre and existing imperial commitments clashed, however, national safety was paramount and the imperial contribution was reduced accordingly. This was a critical element of the alliance: each country was an independent nation that privileged national concerns, something that could conflict with and limit support for the UK or the imperial contribution. If the UK viewed some colonies as 'expendable' territories that could be retaken later when the war was won, the Dominions had the freedom of self-government to prioritise domestic concerns over imperial strategy. The use of Dominion power was always conditional for the UK, and the mere existence of overseas British populations did not guarantee its employment as London requested.

Non-British populations placed even greater limits on the actions of Dominion governments, although only in South Africa was the British population a minority. Some of these non-British populations, such as Maori in New Zealand, actively engaged in the war effort and were encouraged to do so by their own government. Others were more reticent, of divided opinion, prevented from participation through racial policies or even openly hostile. If British-orientated and originated populations fought as though they co-owned the mother country, questions were raised about the enlistment and combat effectiveness of non-British populations (Afrikaners in the South African divisions in North Africa (Part 4), for instance). French-Canadians and Afrikaners were the most notable examples: proportionally they were under-represented in their nations' armed forces, and they consistently put national interests above the imperial connection, something that restricted the freedom of their governments. Significantly, this influenced Pretoria's decision to stay out of the

BCATP at its inception and to limit financial aid to the UK—although in the latter instance this Afrikaner opposition was probably as convenient as it was politically restrictive for the Union government. The opposition of non-British populations was never more important than its influence on King’s single-minded refusal to countenance a Canadian Army role in MEC, which I discuss in Part 4. The Canadian prime minister instead prioritised the less casualty-inducing naval and air training roles in an attempt to prevent an English- and French-Canadian rift over conscription. Although domestic dissension was sometimes exaggerated and employed as a negotiating tool by Dominion governments reluctant to acquiesce to every demand from London, it did set limitations on the freedom of action of the Dominions to support the UK.

Finally, for all the benefits of having the ‘British nations’ spread across the globe, the geographical range of the Commonwealth was also restrictive in coordinating its effort. The most obvious example of this was in Australia and New Zealand, where the regional threat of Japan induced the reorientation of their war efforts, to varying extents, to the Pacific Theatre and under American command. Canada’s location in North America was important because of its relative security and increasing involvement with the USA—Ottawa sought the role of intermediary between its two major allies (London and Washington) and correspondingly had a smaller interest in the plight of the colonies and imperial positions that were viewed as strategically vital to the other Dominions, such as the Suez Canal.<sup>9</sup> South Africa limited its effort to its immediate region—although, as I argue, this was a shared imperial conception of regional defence, one that eventually allowed South Africans to fight on mainland Europe. Nevertheless, the main thrust of South Africa’s military contribution over the course of the war was in Africa. Strategic developments made this extremely important to British victory, but the regional emphasis was a limitation on South Africa’s effort.

### THE DOMINIONS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR: EMPIRE, ALLIANCE AND WARFARE

The case studies and themes that run throughout this analysis reveal a lot about the Commonwealth in the Second World War and have important implications for the constellation of power that linked the UK and the Dominions in the post-war period. The success of the UK in gaining and maintaining the support of the Dominions throughout the war,



support that was essential to British victory, in part explains the laudatory narratives of empire that largely persisted until the 1950s and placed the Dominions at their core. The Second World War appeared to have proven that the UK had developed a form of imperial association that allowed it to dispense with the traditional colonial methods of subjugation and to rely instead on a cooperative imperial model that utilised financial, military and political leadership to maintain the UK's power, in place of repressive force. The peaceful constitutional progress of the Dominions in the inter-war period, followed by their substantial war efforts in support of the UK, despite their increased autonomy, understandably augured well for the future of the British Empire.

The post-war era called this future into question with the decolonisation of the Indian subcontinent. Despite the resoundingly successful Anglo-Dominion relationships during the Second World War, in light of decolonisation, even Commonwealth statesmen questioned whether the addition of new Dominions such as India—that were not former settler-colonies—would allow the 'old' Commonwealth dynamic to be maintained in the post-war era.<sup>10</sup> The evolution of the Commonwealth after the war,<sup>11</sup> and the changing historical focus on the periphery of empire and area studies resulted in an increasing de-emphasis on the study of the white Commonwealth and a new attention to subaltern relationships. Partly as a result of this historiographical shift, the incredible success of Anglo-Dominion cooperation during the war became subsumed into a narrative of the inevitability of decolonisation. Focusing our attention once again on the war years, and re-examining the extent to which the war actually affected the ties that bound the Dominions to the UK, can help us to avoid a teleological approach to the end of empire.

The success of British Commonwealth imperialism in mobilising former colonies to provide vital assistance in winning the war was unique to the UK—it was the only European power to achieve such a feat during the war. The Commonwealth was an exceptional alliance at war: the imperial relationship facilitated forms of cooperation that were not present in other alliances. Militarily, the growth of Dominion armed forces—designed and developed to cooperate within and alongside the UK's own—ensured a high level of interoperability between the UK and Dominion units. This was of great importance because it allowed the UK to have the majority of the RAF's air training take place in the Dominions without any fears over operational efficiency; it allowed MEC to fight for long periods primarily with Dominion units that were capable of interchanging with

other imperial forces; and it allowed Dominion naval power to operate as an adjunct to the Royal Navy when required. The reasonably consistent willingness of the Dominions to operate under London's strategic direction facilitated the specific roles that the Dominions carved out in the war, such as Canada's large naval forces fulfilling the specialised role of escorting merchant ships or the Dominion divisions that combined to form a significant portion of the fighting strength of the Eighth Army.

The cultural connections ensured a high level of voluntary enlistment, for instance in Canada, even though there was no risk of the country coming under serious attack. And these same connections led Canadian policy-makers to feel confident enough to offer the Billion Dollar Gift in financial aid. To take the Anglo-American alliance as the counter-example, the word 'gift' was anathema in Washington's provision of aid to the UK. Instead, the vast supplies provided were nominally very conditional: Lend-Lease.

Central to the cultural connection was the importance of Britishness as a unifying identity. This was heightened during the war because of the direct threat from others to this British identity. Within the Commonwealth itself, there is little doubt that Britishness had a close association with whiteness. This racial conception inspired white Australia and white Canada policies to prevent Asian immigration to those Dominions during the first half of the twentieth century. This Britishness—implied as whiteness—allowed the Dominions to be part of a larger power structure and a wider identity; it allowed the UK to employ manpower and resources far beyond what the British Isles could muster, while maintaining the racial hierarchy of empire.

Britishness was also a political identity for the Dominion nations, guaranteeing a seat at the top table of the British Empire and a potentially amplified voice for the small Dominions in international affairs. The Dominions were a part of a British world network that provided opportunities in financial, political and territorial gain. The war furthered these opportunities for the Dominions and reinforced their desire to fight for British victory, spurring unprecedented generosity relative to the other alliances at war, with the possible exception of South Africa. This point is so important because it pervasively affected the relationship in both the metropole and at the periphery: in no other British alliance, whether with the USA, USSR or even with India, could the UK receive something for nothing. Shared interests and identity set the Commonwealth apart from the other alliances in the Second World War, because the UK could almost always count on the Dominions for assistance without sacrificing something in return.

This demonstrates the exceptional nature of the Commonwealth relationship and its foundational importance to the UK as an imperial power. The UK depended on the Dominions to project military power globally. In this volume I show that this was because the Dominions perceived that, as important parts of the British world, they had a stake in British victory; their own financial and political standings were dependent upon Britain surviving the war as a global power. Although sentiment tied the Dominions to the UK and encouraged their voluntary participation, my case studies demonstrate that in every instance, Dominion generosity was governed by principles of national gain—political, financial and geostrategic. Their contributions were both essential to British victory and served to promote their own regional and global interests, which emerged from the war largely improved.

These factors drove the Dominions to make an indispensable contribution to the war effort, facilitated by the distinctive imperial framework of the Commonwealth, a system that evolved methods for close military, political and economic cooperation during the early twentieth century and persisted into the post-war years largely intact. Nevertheless, the war transformed these bonds; in 1939, the Anglo-Dominion relationship betrayed strong traces of the dependency that characterized the mother country-settler-colony arrangement. By 1945, the Dominions had evolved from dependence to partnership with the UK, due to financial and national developments that augmented interwar political autonomy. This maturing relationship evolved under the strain of war, but the problems of wartime cooperation, numerous though they were, could be surmounted because the Dominions continued to perceive a tangible benefit in remaining part of a victorious British world. My case studies demonstrate that the links that held the Commonwealth together—military, financial, political and cultural—progressed into a partnership over the course of the war that proved sufficiently flexible, even under significant strain, to make weathering the next storm—decolonisation of the colonial empire—not entirely implausible.

The British Commonwealth in 1939 was an exceptional form of empire that facilitated the evolution of a uniquely cooperative alliance at war. This was based on the Anglo-Dominion relationships that existed in the interwar period, bonds that facilitated a Dominion contribution that was fundamental to British victory because these links existed on all fronts: military, economic, cultural and political. The additional resources that the Dominions provided—manpower most important of all, as well as the

geographic location of each Dominion—gave the Commonwealth depth in white manpower and a global reach. The UK relied on the Dominions to exert military power on this global scale. The Dominions were willing to underwrite this effort because their interests were served by participating and because they had a stake in British victory. These motivations drove the Dominion effort that functioned so successfully within the Commonwealth framework, resulting in the Dominions playing an essential role in British victory, 1939–1945.

## NOTES

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8. ‘Report on Indian Officers now Serving with the Royal Air Force’, September 1941, AIR 2/8056.
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10. See papers 760, 792, 842, 843 and 846–9 in J. van der Poel (ed.), *Selections from the Smuts Papers: Volume 7, August 1945–October 1950* (Cambridge, 1973).
11. The changing political and cultural emphasis was such that the ‘British Commonwealth’ became the ‘Commonwealth of Nations’ in 1949.

# APPENDIX I: COMBINED BRITISH AIR TRAINING

**Table A.1** Total output of qualified aircrew by national air force

Location of output	Nationality	Pilots	Observers and navigators	Air bombers	Wireless operators (Air-gunner)	Air gunners	Flight engineers	Total
United Kingdom	RAF	15,287	9869	728	27,190	28,243	17,885	99,202
	RAF <i>Total</i>	15	4	1	6	2	-	28
Canada	RAF	15,302	9873	729	27,196	28,245	17,885	99,230
	RAF RCAF	22,068	15,778	781	755	2096	-	48,278
	RAAF	25,918	12,885	6659	12,744	12,917	1913	73,006
	RNZAF	4045	1643	799	2875	244	-	9606
	RAF	2220	1583	634	2122	443	-	7002
<i>Total</i>	18	-	-	-	-	-	18	-
Australia	RAAF	54,269	31,859	15,673	18,496	15,700	1913	137,910
	RNZAF	10,998	5929	159	7158	3286	369	27,899
New Zealand	RNZAF	6118	165	-	-	208	-	6491
South Africa	RAF	4227	10,170	2404	-	455	-	17,246
	SAAF	4123	2072	56	1909	622	79	8861
	<i>Total</i>	8350	12,242	2460	1909	1067	79	26,107
Southern Rhodesia	RAF	7216	717	-	-	1591	-	9524
	RAAF	514	61	-	-	8	-	583
<i>Total</i>	7730	778	-	-	-	1599	-	10,107
India	RAF	165	21	-	-	-	14	200
	RIAF	791	93	-	185	17	-	1086
	<i>Total</i>	956	114	-	185	17	14	1286
Middle East	RAF	273	38	-	-	1116	-	1472
	RAF	13,673	1715	-	662	-	-	16,050
USA	RAF	62,909	38,308	10,713	28,607	33,536	17,899	191,972
	RCAF	25,918	12,855	6659	12,744	12,917	1913	73,006
	RAAF	15,557	7633	958	10,033	3538	369	38,088
	RNZAF	8338	1748	634	2122	651	-	13,493
	SAAF	4123	2072	56	1909	622	79	8861
RAF	824	97	1	191	-	19	-	1132
<i>Total</i>	117,669	62,713	19,021	55,606	51,283	20,260	326,552	

Source: Air Ministry (1952), p. 47

## APPENDIX 2: PERCENTAGE ANALYSES OF COMMONWEALTH AIR TRAINING

**Table A.2** All aircrews by nationality

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Output</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
RAF	191,972	58.8
RCAF	73,006	22.4
RAAF	38,088	11.7
RNZAF	13,493	4.1
SAAF	8861	2.7
RIAF	1132	0.3
Total	326,552	100
<i>Division by UK, Dominions and Colonial empire</i>		
RAF	191,972	58.8
Dominion air forces	133,448	40.9
RIAF	1132	0.3

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), statistical appendices

**Table A.3** Pilots by nationality

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Output</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
RAF	62,909	53.5
RCAF	25,918	22.0
RAAF	15,557	13.2
RNZAF	8338	7.1
SAAF	4123	3.5
RIAF	824	0.7
Total	117,669	100
<i>Division by UK, Dominions and Colonial empire</i>		
RAF	62,909	53.5
Dominion air forces	53,936	45.8
RIAF	824	0.7

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), statistical appendices

**Table A.4** Air production by training location

<i>Location</i>	<i>Output</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
United Kingdom	99,230	30.4
Canada	137,910	42.2
Australia	27,899	8.5
New Zealand	6491	2.0
South Africa	26,107	8.0
Allied and Colonial Territories	28,915	8.9
Total	326,552	100
<i>Division by UK, Dominions and Allied and Colonial territories</i>		
UK	99,230	30.4
Dominions	198,407	60.7
Allied and Colonial Territories	28,915	8.9

*Source:* Air Ministry (1952), statistical appendices

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