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U.S. MARINES IN WARTIME MELBOURNE 1943

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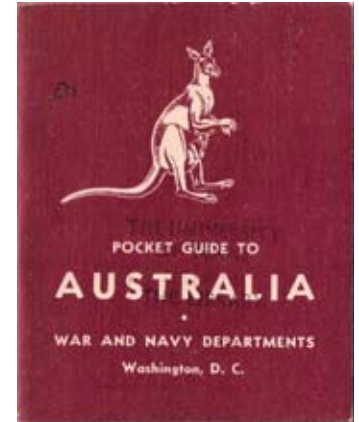
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U.S. MARINES IN WARTIME MELBOURNE 1943

Battle-weary and in poor health following the Guadalcanal campaign, an important turning point in the Allied fight against the Japanese, the men of the First Marine Division, United States Marine Corps were shipped to Melbourne for nine months recuperation in January 1943. Greeted with warm hospitality, these 15,000 young American men found a ‘home away from home’. They formed enduring friendships with Australian families, and romantic attachments with young Australian women. Drawing on original research and incorporating oral histories, memoirs and letters, this exhibition examines the little-known story of the U.S. Marines’ ‘friendly invasion’ of Melbourne during World War II.

The sojourn of the Marines in Melbourne is a small episode in the history of the Pacific war, which led to the strengthening of military and cultural ties between Australia and the U.S. Australia had been at war since September 1939, entering the conflict alongside Britain and sending



2.

troops to fight in Europe and the Middle East. On 7 December 1941 the Japanese bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i, bringing the U.S. into the war. As the Japanese advanced swiftly through South-East Asia towards Australia, Prime Minister John Curtin delivered his famous address to the nation: ‘I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom’.



1.

Cover. Australian and United States servicemen toast each other at the allied forces get together night at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Melbourne, Vic. 14 March 1943. Australian War Memorial negative number:138147.

1. (L-R) U.S. Marines Bill Christie and Frank Knapp in Melbourne, 1943 Rachel Jenzen Private Collection.

2. Pocket Guide to Australia. Issued to U.S. servicemen stationed in Australia during World War II. United States. Produced by Army Special Service Division, 1942.

The Australian government fully supported U.S. General Douglas MacArthur's Australian-based command of Allied military operations in the Pacific. Curtin recalled Australian forces from the Middle East to fight in Australia's immediate region. Following the Japanese capture of Singapore on 15 February 1942 and the subsequent bombing of Darwin, Australia was reliant on U.S. military protection. With success at the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway Island in mid-1942, the Allied situation gradually improved. By 1943 there was anticipation in Australia and the U.S. of victory over the Japanese. But this was not immediate and intense fighting occurred throughout the Pacific until the war ended in August 1945.

World War II transformed Australian-American relations and the strategic alliance forged between the two countries left a significant legacy in terms of foreign policy and regional security. The one million U.S. servicemen who passed through Australia during the war also spread new ideas about music, food, language and everyday modes of behaviour and influenced Australian culture more broadly.

Most importantly, the war forged close personal friendships between Australian civilians and American soldiers.

In early 1942, Melbourne was the initial headquarters for the Allied military effort in the south-west Pacific and host to more than 30,000 U.S. soldiers. Their presence stimulated the city's social and economic life, and made a considerable impression upon the Australian people. With preconceived ideas about the U.S. gleaned from Hollywood movies, Melburnians eagerly learned about 'real' American habits and customs. It was inevitable that in an environment of wartime anxiety and social stress, the government and churches raised concerns about the 'immoral' behaviour of young Australian women who fraternised with the dashing young servicemen. By the middle of 1942, however, General MacArthur relocated Allied headquarters to Brisbane, and the American forces were despatched to the military front.

While successive contingents of U.S. troops passed through Melbourne, it is the lengthy nine-month stay of the Marines during 1943 that is distinctive and particularly memorable. The Marines considered Melbourne 'their second home'. They even adopted the traditional Australian folksong 'Waltzing Matilda' as their 'battle hymn' and have continued to sing it at every annual reunion since the war ended.



3.

The First Division Marines arrived in Melbourne as the heroes of Guadalcanal. Specialising in amphibious landings, the U.S. Marine Corps is an elite voluntary fighting force, 'a breed apart' from other branches of the American military. Its reputation for daring exploits was firmly established in World War II. The First Marine Division is famous for launching the first American offensive of the

Pacific war at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and later fought at Cape Gloucester, Peleliu, Okinawa and Iwo Jima. Approximately 90 per cent of Marines stationed in Melbourne enlisted in a surge of patriotism and were attracted to the prestige and rigorous training of the Corps. The majority were under twenty years of age, and they came from all regions of the U.S. Most were from agricultural or blue-collar backgrounds and a considerable number were the sons of recent immigrants to America.

Melbourne was the biggest city some had ever seen. By 1943 it was a city in the midst of war. To protect its port facilities, factories and people from aerial attack, streetlights were dimmed under 'brownout' regulations and air-raid trenches were dug throughout parklands. Many staple items of food and clothing were rationed or simply unobtainable. Civilians queued for beer, chocolates and other luxuries. Strict federal controls were enforced over all aspects of civilian life, from employment to travel to leisure.

3. 1st Marine Division Guadalcanal Patch designed by General Merrill B. Twining, 1943. Rachel Jenzen Private Collection.



4.

More women than ever before had entered the workforce, taking on non-traditional roles. Families were split apart, and all young adults were in the military services or in essential war work. For Dawne Balester, in her late teens in 1943: 'Melbourne was an empty city. The only men you saw were little boys or very old men... Women drove the trains, women delivered the mail, women did everything.... When [the Marines] came, the whole city came alive again'.



5.

The fighting at Guadalcanal had taken a terrible toll. As Marine veteran Norris Cole recalled: '...the division suffered 100% casualties, with the dead, wounded, and those sick from malaria, dengue fever, jungle rot, malnutrition and combat fatigue... we were a pretty sickly bunch'. Those most severely affected were sent to the 4th General Hospital (now the Royal Melbourne Hospital) in Parkville for treatment. Malaria was the most widespread condition, with the recurrent symptoms of the tropical disease often mistaken by Australians for drunkenness.

4. Melbourne war bride Dawne Balester (nee McLeod-Sharpe), Mentone, Australia, 1945. Reproduced by permission Balester family.

5. U.S. Marine Corporal Fred Balester, studio photograph, 1942. Reproduced by permission Balester family.

6. U.S. Marines and Australian friends, Melbourne, September 1943. Photo taken by U.S. Marine Private Bob Barton. Rachel Jenzen Private Collection.



6.

As the young men recovered, they came to view Melbourne as a kind of paradise, representing the antithesis of war.

The Marines were mostly accommodated in the covered spectator stands of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, soon known as Camp Murphy and only a short stroll from the city centre. Smaller camps were set up at the South Melbourne Cricket Ground and at Mount Martha and Ballarat in regional Victoria. Officers lived in greater style, often enjoying private apartments.

Eager to forget about the war, the Marines found much to like about Melbourne. Favourite places and pastimes recalled include: the seaside suburb of St Kilda and Luna Park; walks along the Yarra River and in the Botanic Gardens; dancing at the Palm Grove and the Trocadero; riding the trams; shopping in department stores; attending movies and the races; and viewing the famous nude portrait of 'Chloe' publicly displayed in Young and Jacksons' hotel.



7.

7. Victory medals issued to all City of Melbourne employees. Medals, Victory; Europe and the Pacific, 1945. Maker: Stokes, Melbourne. City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection.

8. U.S. Marines with Australian family, Victoria, 1943. Rachel Jenzen Private Collection



8.

9. U.S. Marines march through Melbourne on George Washington's birthday, 22 February 1943. City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Melbourne was also the site of the Marines' only public parade. Held on George Washington's Birthday, 22 February 1943, Melburnians turned out in force to cheer 'the saviours of Australia' marching from the Shrine of Remembrance to Parliament House past Flinders Street Station and the Town Hall.

With so many of their own men absent, Melbourne women greeted the visiting Marines with considerable excitement. The feeling was clearly reciprocated. Many veterans equate Melbourne with a 'coming of age'

and their first romantic and sexual relationships. One Marine veteran recalled his Australian girl: 'We walked in the park, sat near the Shrine of Remembrance, sat on the banks of the 'dirty' Yarra, held hands [for] what seemed forever and kissed "till our lips were sore"'. And at the end of the war, as many as 15,000 Australian war brides journeyed to the United States.

10. Venereal disease prevention poster distributed by U.S. military authorities to servicemen stationed in Australia. Poster, *Don't Risk it Feller*, Maker unknown, 1942-45, ink on paper, 74 x 61cm, City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection



9.

Relationships between Melbourne women and U.S. Marines became a source of community tension and hostility, especially from Australian servicemen. In February 1943 mounted police intervened in the 'Battle of Melbourne', a street brawl between U.S. Marines and men of the AIF Ninth Division in the city on leave. Eager to improve relations, the Marines hosted a conciliatory 'beer party' for the two forces at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on 14 March. The night was an unparalleled success and ensured ongoing goodwill.



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11.

This exhibition draws upon original research conducted from the 1980s onwards in Australia and the U.S. Kate Darian-Smith's pioneering interviews with Australians about Melbourne during World War II reveal the complexity of civilian responses to the American military presence. In a path-breaking study, Rachel Jenzen travelled throughout the U.S., participating in reunions of Marine veterans. Motivated by nostalgia, curiosity, gratitude and in some cases, regret, these men welcomed the chance to remember their soldiering past.

These research materials form a unique archive, highlighting the significance of the Marines stay in Melbourne during 1943.

Although popular Australian representations of American servicemen portrayed them as 'over-paid, over-sexed and over here', the reality was more complex. Many Marines were away from home for the first time and eager for the comfort and reassurance of domestic life. Veteran Jack Biggins expressed his thanks to the people of Melbourne: "'You" were wonderful to us! You adopted a group of malaria ridden teenagers who were a long way from home.' Their friendships with Australians proved to be enlightening cross-cultural encounters which often endured for decades after the war.

Kate Darian-Smith
and Rachel Jenzen
February 2010

11. U.S. Marine Private Herb Lehmann
with fiancé, Ohio, USA, c.1942.
Rachel Jenzen Private Collection

Curator Biographies

Professor Kate Darian-Smith is Professor of Australian Studies and History at the Australian Centre, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne. Her publications on oral history, Australian society and war include the groundbreaking study, *On the Home Front: Melbourne in Wartime 1939–1945* (second edition, Melbourne University Press, 2009).

Rachel Jenzen completed a Master of Arts in History at the University of Melbourne in 2000, and worked as a research assistant and tutor while undertaking her postgraduate studies. Rachel travelled extensively in the U.S. for her research on the U.S. Marines in wartime Victoria, creating a substantial archive of letters, interviews, memoirs and photographs.

Further information on the U.S. Marines in Melbourne can be found on the website:
www.history.unimelb.edu.au/marinesmelbourne/

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12. U.S. Marine Private James
Martin with "Peggy" the dog,
Victoria Park, Ballarat, 1943.
Rachel Jenzen Private Collection.