

# Australia under Threat: The defence of Australia 1942–43

Although traditionally Australians have always feared attack from the north, World War II has been the only conflict in which Australia itself faced direct military attack. What actually happened? What impact did the decisions of the wartime governments of Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA have on civilians and combatants? This investigation covers the period when Australia was ‘under threat’.

## To the teacher

### Recommended levels

Upper primary    Lower secondary    Middle secondary    Upper secondary

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### Background information

On 3 September 1939, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced ‘in consequence of persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and ... as a result, Australia is also at war’. At first, most Australian forces were committed to Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa. In early 1942, Australian forces were sent to strengthen the defences of Singapore and Malaya. When Japan landed troops in Malaya on 8 December 1941, the threat of war came much closer to home.

From 8 December 1941 to March–April 1942, Japanese forces conquered all before them. Rabaul, in the Australian Trust Territory of New Guinea, fell on 23 January. By early February, Australian and Allied units had been driven back to the island of Singapore. On 15 February, Singapore itself fell and over 130 000 Allied servicemen, 15 000 of them Australians, became prisoners of war. On 19 February, Darwin suffered intense Japanese air attack, and in May Sydney was attacked by Japanese submarines. It seemed possible at the time that Australia might be invaded. By early May 1942, Japanese conquests to Australia’s immediate north included all of the Netherlands East Indies (modern Indonesia) and much of New Guinea.

The Japanese now turned their attention to the conquest of Australian-held Papua in New Guinea. A Japanese invasion fleet left Rabaul for Port Moresby and a covering carrier force ranged out into the Coral Sea. There, over 5–8 May 1942, one of the most significant battles in Australian history was fought – the Battle of the Coral Sea. US airmen, flying from aircraft carriers, turned back the Japanese fleet despite severe losses, and an Australian-led battle fleet forced the enemy invasion ships to head back to Rabaul.



Wounded Australians from the 55/53rd Battalion reach a first aid station on the Sanananda Track, Papua, 1942.

AWM 013857

As a result of this setback, in July 1942 a Japanese force landed in northern Papua and began fighting its way along the Kokoda Track over the Owen Stanley Range towards Port Moresby. The defence of Port Moresby was critical to Australia, as losing it would have left northern Australia open to attack. However, the enemy advance over the Kokoda Track and a landing at Milne Bay in eastern Papua both failed and the Japanese retreated to strongly defended positions at Buna, Gona and Sanananda on the northern coast of Papua. After heavy and costly fighting, these places fell to Australian and American attack. By the end of January 1943 the immediate threat to Australia was over.

The focus of this investigation is the Pacific War in 1942 and early 1943. The emphasis is on Australian responses and on the events that eventually turned the tide. By January 1943, Allied forces had won decisive victories and over the next two-and-a-half years of engagements, defeated the enemy on land and at sea. This is the heroic story of the defence of Australia.

### Historical literacies

Events of the past  
Narratives of the past  
Research skills  
Historical concepts  
ICT understandings  
Making connections  
Representational expression  
Historical explanation

## Indicators of student achievement

At the end of this unit students should be able to:

- **connect** military operations with accurate locations and dates
- **describe** significant events in the defence of Australia during World War II
- **recognise** the contributions and sacrifices made by Allied forces in the Pacific.

## Introductory activity

In this activity, students investigate two significant attacks on Australian soil, and briefly examine others. They consider the following focus questions:

- 1 What actually happened in the attacks on Darwin and Sydney in 1942?
- 2 What damage was done?
- 3 How would it have felt to be there?
- 4 How were these attacks viewed by civilians? How were they viewed by the Australian Government?
- 5 What effects would they have had on the war?

## Working the web

The main website used in this section is the Australian War Memorial (AWM) website. Two subject headings – ‘19 February 1942, The bombing of Darwin’ and ‘31 May 1942, Sydney under attack: Japanese Midget Submarine’ – contain most of the information needed by students. Photographs, leaflets, reports, personal stories, maps, diagrams and lectures (in both audio and print form) are also available.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Australians at War > Anniversary Talks > 19 February 1942,  
The bombing of Darwin

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Australians at War > Anniversary Talks > 31 May 1942,  
Sydney under attack: Japanese Midget Submarine

The Australians at War website provides additional material in the form of personal stories. Direct students to the following stories:

- 'A day Harry Dale ...' (p 3)
- 'Rex learned to flatten himself ...', 'AWAS operated secret wireless station ...', and 'Wireless operators kept an eye' (p 10).

[www.australiansatwar.gov.au](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au) > The Great Search > World War II

More stories can be found at the 'Through My Eyes' section on the Australians at War website. Students can read or listen to two accounts in 'Thoughts of Home'.

[www.australiansatwar.gov.au](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au) > Through My Eyes > Thoughts of Home

For students working on the bombing of Darwin, *Federation Frontline*, a book on the experiences of Darwin's inhabitants during the bombing, can be downloaded from the Internet.

[www.pandora.nla.gov.au](http://www.pandora.nla.gov.au) > History & Geography > Centenary of  
Federation > Federation Frontline > Home Page

## Identifying and analysing

For this task, divide the class into two groups – the residents of Sydney and those of Darwin – and further divide it into small teams. Students can self-select their teams, but should include in each team people with expertise in the areas of facts and figures, print text, visual material and audio material. Provide each student with the focus questions for this activity. Students can choose one of several preferred media (audio, visual or text-based) to collect information in order to answer the questions using the website resources listed above. All team members will need to help with finding print-based material, as this forms the bulk of the resources on websites.

Discuss the final form of students' work, which should be presented as a scrapbook that a grandparent has compiled for a 12-year-old grandchild. Students will need to evaluate the information they have collected, and choose items suitable for a 12-year-old. Discuss with students stories of the past that an older relative or family friend may have told them, and ask them to consider what made the best stories so interesting.



The naval depot ship *Kuttabul* damaged by torpedo during the Japanese submarine raid on Sydney Harbour, 1942.

AWM 042975

The scrapbook will need to include:

- photographs
- a timetable of the events of the day the city (either Sydney or Darwin) was attacked
- maps or diagrams to assist understanding
- simple explanations of what occurred
- one or two personal stories related to the events.

### Presenting the findings

The finished scrapbooks could be put on display, used as a class reading resource, presented to the library or read to younger students as a shared activity for the commemoration of Anzac Day or Remembrance Day.

## Activity 1: What was the Battle of the Coral Sea?

In this activity, students consider the significance of the Battle of the Coral Sea and the importance of the US alliance to the defence of Australia.

Ask students to locate Hawaii on a wall map of the Asia–Pacific. Ask them what they know about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Explain that this event was a turning point in World War II and read the following paragraph aloud to the class:

The following day, the US Congress declared that ‘the Imperial Government of Japan has committed unprovoked acts of war against the Government and the people of the United States of America’, and it authorised the President ‘to employ the entire naval and military forces of the United States and the resources of the Government to carry on war against the Imperial Government of Japan’.

Ask students the following questions:

- Why would Australians have welcomed the news that the USA had formally declared war on Japan?
- How would the entry of the USA into the war have helped in the defence of Australia?

### Working the web

The following areas of the AWM website will give students a general overview of the Battle of the Coral Sea; however, they will need to conduct other web-based and library research to obtain further details. Advise students to take brief notes on the strategies, actions and losses of each country involved.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Coral Sea Battle



Attack on Pearl Harbor. US sailors and airmen watch in a daze as the ship USS *Arizona* explodes.

AWM 043821

Students should also collect some of the images on the AWM website by going to the Collection Databases and searching under the keywords 'Battle of Coral Sea'. Select one or two students to print some of these photographs for class display.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Collection Databases > Collections Search

## Identifying and analysing

Review the information students have compiled, checking it for accuracy. Conduct a class discussion on the following questions:

- What were the main events in the Battle of the Coral Sea?
- What role did Australian vessels and aircraft play in the battle?
- How did the Battle of the Coral Sea assist efforts to defend New Guinea?
- Why is the Battle of the Coral Sea remembered and commemorated with gratitude by Australians today?

Ask students to write a paragraph about the importance of the Battle of the Coral Sea to the defence of Australia.

## Presenting the findings

Ask students to create a poster on the Battle of the Coral Sea, based on the information they have collected. The poster could include the statistics of the battle, images collected during the web searches and the statement about its importance.

## Activity 2: What happened in the New Guinea campaign?

In this activity, students consider the major aspects of the New Guinea campaign and its significance in relation to the defence of Australia. Using a browser, search for a map of Papua New Guinea. Photocopy and distribute the map to students. Note that, in 1942, the eastern half of New Guinea was divided into two political areas that were both administered by Australia. Ask students the following questions to set the scene and to establish why New Guinea was strategically important to Australia:

- What were the two parts of New Guinea administered by Australia called?
- What is the approximate distance between the northern tip of Queensland and the coast of Papua?
- Which major towns in Papua would be important for Australia to defend? Why?
- What do you know about the climate, vegetation and terrain of New Guinea?
- What dangers to health would exist in a tropical region such as this?
- How would all these conditions affect the fighting ability of soldiers?
- Why might it be difficult to supply soldiers in this region with food and equipment?

Ask students to annotate their maps with dates and significant information as they



Kittyhawk fighter planes of the RAAF at an aerodrome carved out of a coconut plantation, Milne Bay, Papua, 1942.

AWM 026657

research, for example 'Rabaul – an important base for the Japanese attack on New Guinea'; 'Milne Bay – had an airstrip that Australia was anxious to defend'.

### Working the web

Divide the class into four groups of equal size. Three of the groups will each research one of three crucial battles that involved Australian forces in Papua – the campaign on the Kokoda Track, the battle at Milne Bay and the Battle of the Beachheads. The fourth group will research Coastwatchers.

#### Research group 1: The Kokoda Track, 1942

Direct the group to the following websites.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Kokoda Track/Trail > High command and the Kokoda campaign

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Kokoda Track/Trail > Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Kokoda Track/Trail > Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway: Overview – Oral Histories

[www.australiansatwar.gov.au](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au) > The Great Search > World War II > 'Sapper Recalls Years Fighting In New Guinea' (p 11) and 'To Have A Mate, You've Got To Be A Mate' (p 11)

[www.ww2australia.gov.au](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au) > As Far As They Got

Pictures of the Kokoda Track, available in the Collection Databases on the AWM website, will also be useful.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Collection Databases > Collections Search > Kokoda

#### Research group 2: Milne Bay, 1942

Direct the group to the following websites.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Australians at War > Remembering 1942 > For schools: Activities for students > Activity 5: Milne Bay

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Australians at War > Remembering 1942 > 5 September 1942, Milne Bay > Roll of Honour talk

[www.ww2australia.gov.au](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au) > 'As Far As They Got' and 'Beachhead Battles'  
[www.australiansatwar.gov.au](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au) > The Great Search > World War II > 'Living Through "Friendly Fire" In New Guinea'

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Kokoda Track/Trail > Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway > Guided Tour > Station 1

[www.ww2australia.gov.au](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au) > As Far As They Got



Australian gunners unloading a Japanese barge captured at Milne Bay, Papua, 1942.

AWM 069260

Pictures of Milne Bay in the Collection Databases on the AWM website will be also useful.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Collection Databases > Collections Search > Milne Bay

### Research group 3: The Battle of the Beachheads, 1942–43

Direct the group to the following websites.

[www.ww2australia.gov.au](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au) > 'As Far As They Got' and 'Beachhead Battles'

Pictures in the Collection Databases on the AWM website will be useful. Ask students to search under 'Buna 1942', 'Gona 1942' and 'Sanananda 1942'.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Collection Databases > Collections Search

### Research group 4: Coastwatchers

Direct the group to the following websites.

[www.ww2australia.gov.au](http://www.ww2australia.gov.au) > Coastwatcher Frontline  
[www.australiansatwar.gov.au](http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au) > The Great Search > World War II >  
 Coastwatchers Played A Vital Role In Pacific War  
[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Encyclopedia > Kokoda Track/Trail > Kokoda Track  
 Memorial Walkway: Station 12

Pictures under the keyword 'coastwatching' in the Collection Databases on the AWM website will be useful.

[www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au) > Collection Databases > Collections Search > coastwatching

## Identifying and analysing

At an appropriate point in the group research task, bring the four groups back together to give a preliminary report on their findings. Provide further direction and interest by asking the following additional questions based around their investigations:

- The Kokoda Track is only about 90 kilometres long. Why was the campaign there so difficult and dangerous?
- What contribution did the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) make to the defence of Port Moresby and to other Australian campaigns in New Guinea?
- Why was the Battle of the Coral Sea so important to the land campaigns in New Guinea and the defence of Australia?
- How and when were the Japanese defeated in New Guinea?

### MAD MOUSE

- 1 Why did a poster say 'Remember the Nurses'?
- 2 What was the *Kofuku Maru*?
- 3 What did the 'Crab's claw' represent?
- 4 Where is Kingsbury's Rock?
- 5 Who sang *Our Air Raid Shelter*?

## Presenting the findings

Set up small scriptwriting groups consisting of one representative from each of the four research groups (Kokoda Track, Milne Bay, Battle of the Beachheads, Coastwatchers). The scriptwriters are to imagine they are New Guinea veterans meeting up at an Anzac Day commemoration. Each group should write a script of the conversation between the four veterans as they reminisce about their respective roles in the war.

The stories each veteran tells should: include authentic dates and placenames; explain details of what they did, how they coped, the problems they faced and their failures and successes; and acknowledge the contribution of all Australia's defence services – navy, army and air force – in the defence of Australia.

Read the scripts aloud to the rest of the class or record them on audio or videotape for sharing with other classes.

## Other resources

*Australia through Time*, Random House, Sydney, 1993.

*Battle of the Beachheads Buna, Gona, Sanananda 1942–43 – Papua New Guinea November 1942–January 1943*, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002.

Peter Cochrane, *Australians at War*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2001.

Daniel Connell, *The War at Home*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1988.

Michael Dugan, *The Two World Wars*, Macmillan Australia, Melbourne 1992.

Michael Dugan and Anne Gunther, *Women Make Australian History*, Macmillan Australia, Melbourne, 1996

Robert Hillman, *When Australia Went to War*, Echidna Books, Melbourne, 2001.

David Horner (ed), *The Battles that Shaped Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994.

*Kokoda 1942 – Papua New Guinea July–November 1942*, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002.

Michael McKernan, *All In*, Nelson Publications, Melbourne, 1983.

*Milne Bay 1942 – Papua New Guinea August–September 1942*, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002.

*Wau Salamua 1942–43 – Papua New Guinea March 1942 – September 1943*, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, ACT, 2003.