

# REASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE OF BRISBANE

by Kay Saunders

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The title ‘The Battle of Brisbane’ on the original programme may have been a misnomer as my paper today is not specifically concerned with that particular set of incidences of 26 and 27 November 1942. Many historians including Geoffrey Bolton (1990), Rosemary Campbell (1989), Kate Darian Smith (1990), Lynette Finch (1992), Darryl McIntyre (1989), Michael McKernan (1984), John Hammond Moore (1981), E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts (1988) as well as Helen Taylor (1986) have examined the events and consequences of these riots.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I would hazard a guess that it would be extremely difficult to offer any new insight into such an over debated single issue involving Australian American relations in Australia in the second world war. Rather than add to the repetition of a well charted story, my purpose is to examine the various stages of developing tension that led to large scale rioting.

One point that needs to be stressed is that the ‘Battle of Brisbane’ essentially represents the most well known or notorious incident involving riots between Australian service personnel and civilians and Americans; but, it is by no means the sole instance of serious violence, although it remains the most spectacular and prolonged. In December 1942, there was a minor riot in the central business district of Melbourne which can be regarded as a prelude to the major confrontation of 13 February 1943 involving over 2000 Allied servicemen.<sup>2</sup> Both Potts and Potts, as well as Darian Smith, agree that this latter confrontation was exacerbated by the return of the 9th Division from the Middle East. Indeed in all these riots, the presence of returned Australian volunteers from the Middle East was a crucial component in escalating tensions. In January 1944 a riot in Perth led to the death of two New Zealand servicemen.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by a wild fracas in the area between George and Goulburn Streets in Sydney, an event witnessed by a large crowd of civilians.<sup>4</sup> In Brisbane also there was another serious riot in Fortitude Valley in December 1942, although this one did not result in any deaths.

The ‘Battle of Brisbane’ — or ‘The Battle of the Canteens’ as Potts and Potts somewhat dismissively term it — was therefore the

first in a prolonged series rather than a unique event. Clearly its initial occurrence on the American holiday of Thanksgiving Day, albeit in the evening, in the central business district of Brisbane, when the city was full of civilians including many cinema goers, added to its initial visibility. Rigid censorship may have prevented widespread media coverage; but it very soon took on mythic qualities that belied its initial confused and spontaneous nature.

Conflict between the Allied Forces in Australia was initially minimal. Numerous commentators such as Moore, Potts and Potts as well as Darian Smith note the existence of a "honeymoon" period in the reception of the US forces in Australia. The Leonski murders of May 1942 in Melbourne would seem to be the generally agreed boundary that marked the end of the initial enthusiasm and the emergence of a more sanguine conflictful pattern of interaction.<sup>5</sup>

After this period, altercations between Australians and Americans escalated. What has been forgotten in delineating the pattern of initial enthusiasm degenerating into marked resentment, is that in the early months of 1942 in Brisbane there already existed a high degree of violence among servicemen. But this manifestation was quite different from the post May pattern. Essentially it was confined (although by no means exclusively) *within* the American forces and was characterised by internal racial rather than national hostilities. In mid April 1942 Colonel C.H. Barnes Jr wrote a crucial report to the Commanding General United States Forces in Australia on the subject of "racial clashes between American negro troops and American white troops in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia". He detailed a series of serious riots which had occurred from 11 to 20 March when black troops attempted to enter "dance halls and skating rinks patronised solely by white people".<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of Australian official pressure to maintain initial patterns of segregation alongside this influential report, concentrations of black troops were sent to remote areas like Mt. Isa, Camooweal, Iron Range or kept strictly zoned in southern and coastal urban areas.<sup>7</sup> What can be observed is that tensions caused by the American presence only later spread outward into the Australian community. Inter-racial violence persisted with the US forces however; but after the 1942 Australian/American fights were more discernible.

By August 1942 over 40,000 of the 98,000 United States military based in Australia were stationed in Brisbane. This figure did not include members of the US Navy or Air Corps.<sup>8</sup> From March members of the Second AIF began to arrive back in Australia. This combination of battle hardened Australian volunteers confronting well dressed American conscripts who had not seen combat but who were acting as the nation's saviours set the scenario for prolonged antagonisms. Humphrey McQueen recently commented at the "Birds

of Prey". Battle of the Coral Sea Conference that Australian civilians in 1942 overwhelmingly believed the US had "saved" them from imminent invasion by the Japanese — a memory perpetuated until the present day despite contrary evidence of Japan's strategic intentions.<sup>9</sup> What I would like to stress is that the 2nd AIF did not subscribe to this civilians' doctrine of secular worship and elevation of the Americans to the status of mythic saviours. They often saw them as bragging untested competitors.

The Assistant Provost Marshall in Brisbane in September 1942 reported that his provosts could not cope either numerically or strategically with the increasing incidence of brawls and feared that a major altercation could not be properly contained.<sup>10</sup> The number of arrests among military personnel in Brisbane rose from 140 in June 1942 to 796 in July and to 1128 by October.<sup>11</sup> About three quarters were members of the Second AIF. As the official War Historian, Gavin Long noted in his diary of 29 October 1942 there were constant brawls, altercations and ugly confrontations occurring between Australian and United States service personnel throughout many parts of Brisbane.<sup>12</sup> Many of these less developed precursors occurred outside hotels and dance halls in the less salubrious parts of town, whereas the riots in 26/27 November took place in the more "respectable" part of the city and were witnessed by a wider range of civilian population.<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Campbell comments that "by October the general pattern of brawling had become an almost daily feature of Brisbane life". She continues with a detailed account of various shootings, stabbings, involving murders and serious injury.<sup>14</sup> Hence it was only one more step for such tensions to explode the following month into the "Battle of Brisbane" and to be manifested in other major urban centres where US forces met Australia militia and members of the Second AIF.

In conclusion, the "Battle of Brisbane" must be regarded as only one, albeit the first and most spectacular confrontation between large members of Australian and American service personnel. Severe riots occurred up to mid 1944 in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne. Brawls and scuffles were repeated daily where ever Australian and US military and naval forces came onto contact. Concentration upon this event as a singular occurrence has obscured other riots and diminished emphasis upon intro/US patterns of conflict and racial violence. It furthermore reinforced the differences between those civilians on the homefront and those who had served on the battle field and the different manner in which they perceived and interacted with the supposedly "friendly invasion". Indeed, it was, as Rosemary Campbell portrays it, the final exasperated actions of "men ill at ease" redefining their collective identity as ANZAC warriors in the face of what they saw as Hollywood inspired "chocolate" soldiers.

## NOTES

1. Geoffrey Bolton, *The Oxford History of Australia*, Vol. 5:1942-1988: The Middle Way, Melbourne, OUP, 1990, p.17; Rosemary Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers: A Question of National Identity*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1989, pp.147-151; Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Homefront: Melbourne in Wartime 1939-1945*, Melbourne, OUP, 1990; Lynette Finch "The Friendly Invasion of GIs" in Libby Connors, Lynette Finch, Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor, *Australia's Frontline: Remembering the 1939-1945 War*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1992, pp. 177-179; Michael McKernan, *All In! Australia During the Second World War*, Sydney, Nelson, 1984, p.103; J.H. Moore, *Over Sexed, Over Paid and Over Here* Americans in Australia 1941-1945, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1981, pp.288-90; D.J. McIntyre "Paragons of Glamour": A Study of the US Military Forces in Australia, 1942-45; PhD Thesis, UQ, 1989, pp.253-266; E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts, *Yanks Down Under: The American Impact on Australia*, Melbourne, OUP, 1985, pp.302-309; Helen Taylor "Rifles or Running Shoes — which is it to be?" Brisbane 1942', Brisbane History Group Paper No.4, *Brisbane at War*, pp.46-48.
2. Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front*, p.219; McIntyre, "Paragons of Glamour", pp.277-278; Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, p.314; McKernan, *All In!*, p.203.
3. McKernan, *All In!*, p.203-4; McKernan argues that one serviceman was killed; in reality two Maori members of the New Zealand forces were killed. McIntyre, "Paragons of Glamour", pp.277-8.
4. Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, p.314.
5. Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under* pp.234-5; Darian-Smith, *On the Homefront*, pp.218-219; Moore, *Over Sexed, Over Paid and Over Here*, p.147.
6. Report by Col. C.H. Barnwell, Inspector General, USAFA to Commanding General, USAFA, 12 April 1942 contained in Walter A. Luszki, *A Rape of Justice: MacArthur and the New Guinea Hangings*, Lanham, Madison Books, 1991, pp. 157-159.
7. Kay Saunders, "Racial Conflict in Brisbane in World War II: The Imposition of Patterns of Segregation upon Black American Servicemen", *Brisbane at War*, Brisbane History Group Papers No.14, 1986 pp.29-34; refer also to Chapter 3 of my forth-coming book *War on the Homefront: State Intervention in Queensland, 1938-1948*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1993.
8. McIntyre, "Paragons of Glamour", p.249.
9. Humphrey McQueen paper at "Birds of Prey": Battle of the Coral Sea Conference, Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney 7-10 May, 1992.
10. Assistant Provost Marshall's report, September 1942. AWM Northern Command Open and Secret Registry, File 148/42.
11. McIntyre, "Paragons of Glamour", p.251.
12. G. Long Diary No.9, 29 October 1942, pp.45-48. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
13. Rosemary Campbell (pp.163-4) and Darryl McIntyre (pp.280-2) also comment on the location of brawls and dance halls and pubs in the poorer parts of town.
14. Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, p.138.