

The B.C.O.F.: A Forgotten Chapter in Australian History by Gary Watson

Most collectors are aware that some KGVI Period Australian stamps were overprinted 'B.C.O.F./JAPAN/1946'. Very few of those same collectors could relate the reasons for the issue, or where the stamps were used, or why they were withdrawn. Fewer still could speak with any confidence about the historical context of the stamps.

Our American friends do a pretty good job of promoting their own history, or at least their historical perspective. Courtesy of the Hollywood propaganda machine, we in Australia know that "America won the war", and that General Douglas MacArthur single-handedly demilitarized Japan, imposed on the country an American-style constitution, gave Japanese women the vote, and protected Emperor Hirohito from prosecution for war crimes. We also know that Japan was both springboard for the US involvement in the Korean War, and welcome haven for their troops on "R and R".

But what was the British Commonwealth Occupation Force? What was its role? In which parts of Japan did it operate? Who were the key players? Perhaps even more importantly, why is the BCOF little more than a footnote in Australian history? Kids growing up here in the 1960s learned nothing about it at school. By the middle of that decade, Vietnam was on everyone's mind and Japan was relevant only as a trading partner.

It was very different in September 1945, when a squadron of Australian naval vessels attended the official surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay.

Australian memories of bitter jungle warfare were clear and recent. The emotional scars of Japanese atrocities in Ambon and Borneo were painfully raw. Thousands of Australian troops had died on the battlefield or in captivity. In victory, then, Australia expected - indeed, demanded - to share in the process of subjugating the Japanese, and to neuter it as a future military threat.

There is no question that the Occupation of Japan was essentially an American operation. MacArthur reluctantly accepted Australia - and the token involvement of Britain, India and New Zealand - as a junior partner. The Americans wrote the rules; the Australians enforced them...in the relatively small area assigned to them. (As a result, many Japanese saw the Americans as saviours, and the Australians as oppressors.)

The Americans were headquartered in the relative comfort of Tokyo; the Australians in the ruined port city of Kure. Tokenism was the order of the day: the Australian presence in the capital was barely tolerated by the Americans, and was limited to largely ceremonial duties. The Yanks saw themselves as essentially "owning the place"; the Aussies were constantly reminded that they were pip-squeaks from an almost irrelevant country.

At least initially, conditions for the Australian troops were almost comically appalling. The original force came directly from tropical Morotai to a bitterly cold Japanese winter. Many were billeted in bombed-out brick buildings that lacked windows, heating, and plumbing. Amenities were few, morale was poor, whoring was a principal diversion, and illicit market activities were rife. Kure was referred to locally as "The City of the Dead". To top it all, American GIs were paid three times as much as the Diggers.

In his exceptional history of the Occupation, "Travels in Atomic Sunshine", author Robin Gerster observed "The Occupationnaires felt like tramps and imposters - not even proper soldiers, let

alone conquering heroes. Dressed in cast-offs, scrounging for basic comforts, they were hardly better off than the derelict people in derelict Japan”.

Despite all that, Australia’s role in the Occupation of Japan was significant. At its height, the BCOF strength was almost 40,000 men, nearly a quarter the size of the American force. The region of south-west Honshu - including Hiroshima - and the large island of Shikoku controlled by the BCOF covered an area of almost 50,000 square kilometres, with a population of some 20 million Japanese. Tellingly, the seven years period of occupation was of greater duration than the global conflagration that immediately preceded it.

The Australians had a number of specific and vital tasks to perform, including: confiscation of weapons; destruction of Japanese military ordnance; suppression of illegal trade (the “Black Market”); immigration control, including the deportation of thousands of Koreans; sea and air reconnaissance; etc. However, one of their first priorities was to erect public toilets!

In the modern era, Australia is well-established as a global policeman. Post-Vietnam, our troops have served with distinction in Rwanda, in Somalia, in Timor, and so on. Iraq and Afghanistan are the latest in a long list of overseas deployments. None of them is anywhere near as significant as the BCOF.

Just this week, we officially mourned the 40th death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan. That’s hardly total war: far more people die in traffic collisions. To keep this statistic in perspective, 77 Australians died in Japan during the Occupation.

Of course, hostilities had officially finished. But with millions of demobilized Japanese soldiers coming home to a devastated nation, Japan was still a dangerous place to be involved in peace-keeping, especially when your commanding officer, Lieutenant-General Horace Robertson felt duty-bound to regularly remind the subjugated that they had brought the poverty, destruction, even the Atomic Bomb, on themselves.

Ironically, back home, the Occupationnaires were widely regarded as soft on the Japanese, as collaborators, even traitors. Large numbers of repatriated Australian soldiers, and even larger numbers of their families who had never even seen an oriental person, harboured a deep-seated enmity towards “Japs”. They wanted the Japanese to suffer in defeat. They were angered and distraught about reports out of Japan that the Australian forces were overseeing the reconstruction of the areas under their control. Australian soldiers taught English, and in turn learned Japanese. Some even made Japan their home.

At least 500 army wives were moved to Japan during the Occupation period. They brought with them more than 600 children. 150 more were born in Japan. They enjoyed a life of rare privilege. A new town, Nijimura (referred to by one of the women as “a miniature Canberra”), was created for the BCOF families, most of whom had at least one Japanese servant. They didn’t pay for phonecalls, medical or dental treatment, transport, or cinema tickets. Many enjoyed their leave at quite luxurious hotels.

The mood at home was such that when the BCOF troops returned to Australia, there was no heroes welcome. Most of the soldiers were short-term volunteers who quietly returned to civilian lives. Both the men and their wives found that talking about Japan was a very delicate affair, a subject best avoided. Children of the Occupation recall being ostracized by their peers and learning to say nothing about their Japanese experiences.

If the general population was cool towards those who served in Japan, it was positively scandalised by those who had fallen in love with Japanese women. The Labour Party’s Arthur Calwell, the rabidly jingoistic Immigration Minister, staunchly declared that no Japanese war brides would ever be allowed into Australia.

At page 6 of "Travels in Atomic Sunshine", Robin Gerster noted "Occupying Japan was more a moral test than a physical one, an exercise in the use and abuse of power given a special tension because it involved Westerners in a position of domination over an Asian people. In terms of the specific Japanese-Australian relationship, it was an unprecedented domestic encounter between the individuals of two nations that had very recently been at each other's throats, people with apparently incompatible traditions and temperaments. As a human event, involving ordinary people having to get on together rather than routinely trying to destroy one another, the Occupation was rather more complex than the murderous and, and somewhat maniacal conflict that preceded it...and much more salutary."

When the government of Robert Menzies eventually relented on the matter of the Japanese women who had married their Antipodean lovers, no fewer than 650 Australian soldiers came home with Japanese wives. It is the perfect irony that perhaps the most positive outcome of the Occupation of Japan was the eventual dismantling and abandonment of the hateful White Australia Policy. (The less said about the "hidden legacy of the Occupation" - the thousands of mixed-race children abandoned in Japan - the better.)

Despite all the problems, the troops who served during the Occupation contributed greatly to the rehabilitation of Japan as a prosperous economy and a democratic nation. But their successes and, indeed, their service, have been all but overlooked in this country. The poignant BCOF lament is that the troops "served Australia far better than Australia served BCOF".

While many of the Occupationnaires had uplifting experiences and even enjoyed their time in Japan, some making close friendships, some being regular returners, for others it was a personal tragedy. Many became desperately ill as a result of exposure to atomic radiation in and around Hiroshima. Their plight - in common with servicemen similarly affected at Maralinga in the 1950s - has been routinely ignored.

In a broader sense, rather than being seen as having been on active service, or as key change-agents in implementing government policy in a hostile environment, members of BCOF have been regarded as having been on some kind of working holiday. Especially those denied medical benefits and pensions - that were the right of others who served during World War II and the Korean War - understandably feel betrayed by their own country.

The story of BCOF is not an overly happy story. But it is a real story, and a real part of this country's history. To ignore it is to dishonour all those who placed their lives at the service of their nation. It would be inappropriate to celebrate the Occupation, but it should always be remembered.