

**FORGOTTEN SOLDIERS:
ALIENS IN THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY'S
EMPLOYMENT COMPANIES DURING WORLD WAR II***

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There is an oft-quoted line from L.P. Hartley's memorable novel, The Go-Between: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' Sometimes, perhaps. But as I trawl through official documents, brave sea-sickness to read old newspapers on merciless microfiche, and listen to the voices on my tapes, I'm constantly reminded of the present. This letter, written to the Prime Minister in 1940, could have been published, with small amendment, in an issue of the *Herald Sun* or *Daily Telegraph* around the time of the *Tampa*:

I have heard on the wireless the news that Australia would be willing to receive internees from England. I beg to protest; we have enough of the scum here already, too many in fact. I am not a vindictive woman, these aliens are God's creatures just the same as we are. All the same I sincerely trust that U-boats get every one of them.[1]

The historian Klaus Neumann believes that 'it is one of history's most important roles to open our eyes 'to a present that may appear in a new light'.[2] Perhaps that is one of the reasons historians constantly review and rewrite the past.

The past of which I write is not so long ago. During the Second World War, the Australian Army established 39 Employment Companies, totalling by war's end about 15,000 men. While the name of these army units occasionally varied – Employment Company, Labour Company, Works Company, Labour Unit, Labour Corps – their function did not. They were established to ensure that the Australian Defence Force had a large corpus of soldiers dedicated to essential labouring tasks, the hard physical labour needed to maintain the war effort and support the fighting forces.

Of the 39 Companies, 11 were in part or whole made up of 'aliens' – ie, non-British citizens. (In those days Australians were also British subjects.) In brief:

2nd and 3rd Cos, based in New South Wales

4th, 6th and 8th Cos, based in Victoria but often working across the Vic/New South Wales border

7th Co, a Chinese Co established in Fremantle WA and moved to Qld

10th Co, in SA (not called an alien Co but with a significant foreign

* This extract comes from a book on the aliens in the Employment Companies being written by Dr June Factor. Requests for permission to quote should be sent to j.factor@unimelb.edu.au

element)

11th Co, starting in the NT but existing only for a very short time before amalgamation with the 12th

12th Co, starting in WA and moving to Qld

23rd Co, consisting in part of what were called Koepangese from 'Timor Dutch East Indies'

36th Co, Indonesians, Javanese as they were often called.

The 'alien' companies were not armed. Soldiers without guns, they camped at places like Tocumwal and Albury on the New South Wales/Victorian border, where an earlier history of State rivalry led to the stupidity of differing rail gauges. There they worked on the trains, loading and unloading military supplies, including foodstuffs and armaments. Across the country, parties of Employment Company soldiers were directed to factories for packing and transporting goods; others worked on the wharves, repaired roads, drove trucks loaded with military equipment. In the words of a journalist, 'Men who were not allowed to carry arms spent their days loading bombs on trucks.' [3] Some of the Chinese in the 7th Co worked in the mines in Queensland and later ended up under the control of the US military. A number of the Koepangese from the 23rd Co became members of the sabotage units in Z Force, sent to report on and infiltrate Japanese-occupied Timor.

From the thousands of entries in the Employment Companies' War Diaries held at the Australian War Memorial, the following examples from the **6th Employment Company** are typical enough:

27.5.42: Working party reported to Tocumwal Rail transshipping stores from Vic. to N.S.W. trucks. Work Party of 6 reported to Dept of Interior cutting wood. 1 work party roofing cookhouse at camp.

20.11.42: Carting timber for new camp started today. 1 officer and 36 other ranks unloading ammunition. 10 other ranks supplied meals to transit troops. 21 other ranks reported to Tocumwal Rail for lashing gang. Weather cool and wet.

It was 'hard yakka', in the words of one of the participants. And though the work lacked glamour, its importance to the conduct of the war was understood by most of the men in the Companies. When I interviewed Frank Klepner from the 6th Co, he said: 'You felt that you were part of the whole nation doing its bit, you were doing your bit in the army towards the achievement of the win of the allies.' But whether the wider community, the majority of the Australian Military Forces, or even the military leadership appreciated this is unclear. More accurately, doubtful. Consider the statement of approbation issued in November 1943 by the Commander-in-Chief, General Blamey:

1. Personnel of Australian Employment Companies, both on the Mainland and in New Guinea, though serving their country in a most unspectacular

role, are carrying out important and often very strenuous work, without which the many arms of the Forces could not properly function.

2. Their duties are such that a continuous maintenance of a high standard of 'esprit-de-corps' is necessary to offset the sometimes monotonous nature of the tasks allotted to them, and this is borne out by the willingness and conscientiousness with which these tasks are performed.

3. The Commander-in Chief, therefore, desires that his appreciation of the services being rendered by these personnel be conveyed to all ranks.[4]

Fine words indeed. However, when we realise that this commendation was produced as the result of a military inquiry into unrest in the 6th Employment Company, it may be viewed more as an attempt to soothe rather than evidence of genuine recognition of the 39 companies' contribution to the war effort. And perhaps one reason for this lack of enthusiasm – in the military and beyond - lies in the composition of some of the Employment Companies.

Above the rank of corporal, most officers represented the old Anglo-Celtic Australian army; a number had served in World War I. In at least 7 of the Employment Companies, these professional soldiers found themselves commanding and organising men ranging in age from 18 to 50, many unaccustomed and sometimes unsuited to heavy physical work.

And these men were foreigners, 'aliens', a sub-set of the Australian population not generally intimates of Army officers[5]. The latter no doubt read the newspapers and some may have shared the opinion of Mr John Black of the New South Wales State Council of the RSL, who declared in the *SMH* in August 1940 that he feared there could be spies among the refugees and urged general internment.[6] Not even the acquisition of Australian citizenship could wipe out the alien stain. According to E. Hardy Johnston, in a letter to the same paper: 'Love of country is the first thing instilled into man from birth, therefore we should be doubly careful even of the naturalized alien. Country of birth will always come first.'[7] That was certainly the view of Sir Donald Cameron, chairman of the RAAF recruiting drive in 1942, who made it clear that naturalization does not enable an alien to overcome the barriers raised by his enemy origin.[8]

Those who had the good fortune, as it were, to come from countries opposed to the Axis powers, were 'friendly aliens'. 'Enemy aliens' originated in the homelands of the enemy: Germany, Austria, Italy or Japan. Some were interned, all suffered police surveillance, restrictions on the ownership of dangerous objects such as radios and cameras, and on movement: 'a Mrs Katz, who crossed Chapel St, Prahran, (Vic) to buy potatoes, was charged by police with leaving her district'[9]. In October 1942 a new classification, 'refugee aliens', was created by amendments to the National Security (Aliens Control) Regulations. Refugee aliens included European refugees who had been driven from their own countries by Nazi religious or political persecution. They were not to be treated as

enemy aliens.

But in the climate and culture of the time, these distinctions were not always appreciated. Quite apart from the absurdity of assuming that nationality equals political allegiance – leading in the early years of the war to the internment of Italian anti-fascists and of Jews escaping Nazi terror – there is ample evidence in official files of ongoing surveillance of supposedly friendly aliens in the Employment Companies, particularly the Chinese.[10] Race as well as nationality appears to have played a role in the assessment of loyalty and reliability.

At the same time, there were continuing public and private expressions of understanding of the circumstances that forced Europeans to flee to Australia, sympathy for their plight, and even support for their enlistment in the military forces. In interviews with Employment Company members, I have found most of the men emphasise the kindness of those Australian families who welcomed them into their homes, and the pleasures of dances and other congenial entertainments provided for the troops; some recall the delights of assignations with local girls. In these interviews they rarely volunteer examples of prejudice or overt hostility.

In the public arena, influential figures who spoke out against the injustice of a blanket condemnation of all ‘aliens’ included Bishop Venn Pilcher, Anglican Bishop Coadjutor of Sydney, the President of the YWCA, Professor Mungo McCallum, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Sydney, and the indefatigable historian and civil libertarian, Brian Fitzpatrick.[11] There were occasionally editorials along similar lines.[12] And the anti-foreigner sentiments, while numerous, would at least be challenged in the newspaper columns. In 1942 there was a spate of hostile letters in the *Melbourne Age*, including attacks on the military for not issuing ‘aliens’ - ‘these people’ ‘with some distinguishing uniform... they should be supplied with a uniform entirely different and distinct ... [from] our fighting forces’ uniform’.[13] In reply, Private G.H., from the 8th Employment Company, wrote as follows:

As a member of the Alien Labour Battalion I would like to express the indignation we feel at the suggestion that we should not be allowed to wear the same badge on our uniform as Australian soldiers do.

We are just as much enemies of Nazi Germany as the Australians are, even more so. The greater part of us volunteered for service, in our company for instance every single man is a volunteer. In England where a similar unit, the Pioneer Corps, was founded on the outbreak of war, there has never been a question of the pioneers not being allowed to wear English Army badges, although they are mainly Germans.

I invite those gentlemen who feel so deeply concerned about us, to come down to the docks with me at 5 o'clock every morning and work 12 hours 7 days a week as we do. Perhaps they may change their opinion then.[14]

I suspect Private G.H. may have exaggerated ever so slightly the length of the working week, but his was just one of many passionate declarations written by Employment Company members expressing loyalty to Australia, rejection of the hated Nazis, and outrage at the demonisation of 'aliens'. As to the question of distinctive uniforms or badges, there is a telling August 1944 entry in the War Diary of the 33rd Employment Company, at the time stationed in Port Moresby. Generally, War Diary entries are brief, even elliptic, but this one is expansive:

Advice was received today that ... this Unit has been redesignated the 33 Australian Works Company. This has removed, to some extent, the stigma of being in the same category as Alien Employment Coys and when our new color patch is issued everyone will be much more satisfied. The Unit will in future be designated as the "33 Australian Works Company (A.I.F.)"[15]

If this officer was correct in his assessment of the views of his fellows, it suggests the 'stigma' associated with the 'alien' soldier never entirely disappeared.

However, such views do not appear to have diminished the commitment to the war effort of the volunteers, and later the conscripts, in the 'alien' Employment Companies. They also managed to enjoy themselves when work allowed. (A favourite nickname for the 8th Employment Company was the 'Enjoyment Company'.)[16] Among those who came from Europe there were scholars and farm labourers, musicians and textile workers, Communists and royalists, Jews and Catholics and evangelical atheists. Diverse in nationality, and in experience of demanding physical work, fastidious or rough-and-ready, they lived in tents and huts in crowded proximity, a shared camaraderie supporting concerts, cartoonists, study groups, gambling, political debate and hunger strikes – when, according to the painter **Yosl Bergner** *'we had home-cooking in our tents and ate more than ever'*[17]; a camaraderie among 'the boys' as they called themselves that usually ensured fundamental stability when political or personal enmity erupted.

Finally the war ended, and in dribs and drabs the men of the Employment Companies were discharged, and quietly returned to civilian life. Some chose to go back, to the 'foreign country' of their past; some travelled to new lands; but most settled in Australia, became legal citizens, built families and careers – and mourned the loved ones fascism destroyed. Among them are men we now celebrate - scientists, artists, educators - and others equally worthy but less noticed: road-builders, market-gardeners, shopkeepers.

The RSL wouldn't accept them as members because they weren't on active service outside Australia. As 'aliens' they sometimes found it difficult to qualify for the post-war 're-establishment benefits' provided by a grateful nation to its defenders. J.V. Barry, a founding member of the Australian

Council for Civil Liberties, a leading Melbourne barrister and later a Supreme Court Judge, wrote a furious letter in December 1945 to Arthur Calwell, then in government. In it he said:

It is bitterly ironical for the Commonwealth, which took advantage of their services, to adopt an attitude similar to that which our vanquished enemy would have taken up.[18]

Perhaps Calwell felt ashamed, or there could have been some other reason – but somehow the persuasive Brian Fitzpatrick found a loophole. In the words of his biographer, Don Watson, Fitzpatrick ‘engineered the entrance of 15 refugees to University, in the face of protests from the RSL and Conservative parliamentarians.’[19]

They remember each other, these ‘alien’ soldiers, sometimes hold reunions. The 8th Employment Company, home of the famous ‘Dunera Boys’, is the most active in this regard, publishing a newsletter and organising social gatherings – though fewer as they grow older and numbers dwindle.

They remember each other, but few remember them. The Employment Companies are barely mentioned in standard histories of World War II. Interest in the ‘Dunera Boys’ has resulted in a few books and a television series that include reference to the 8th Employment Company. Otherwise, these more than 15,000 men have almost fallen out of history.

Yet at a time when xenophobia was widespread in Australian society, a conservative arm of the state, the army, demonstrated the capacity (undoubtedly spurred by the need for labour) successfully to incorporate ‘foreigners’ into its structures. Differences of nationality, language and religion were subsumed in the common goal of defending Australia against the Axis powers.

Is it too far-fetched to suggest that the army's Employment Companies provide an early exemplar of state-sponsored multiculturalism in this country? Multiculturalism is a relatively new – and regularly contested - term in Australian political discourse. Its antecedents are exemplified in the experience of the ‘friendly’, ‘enemy’, ‘allied’ and ‘refugee’ ‘aliens’ whose very existence in this society points to the inadequacy of both the traditional ‘Anglo’ story of Australian life, and the story we tell about our military forces in World War II. This forgotten story, the story of the Employment Companies, offers another perspective of Australian ‘identity’ and of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual immigrants and refugees whose labour and commitment was an essential component of this country’s successful battle against military fascism in the Second World War.

Let the last word come from **Yosl Bergner, from the 6th**:

We were a unique unit though at the time we didn't know it. Such a mixture of different nationalities. If only the world would realize that people with different cultures and habits and languages can live together as we did... But for that, I suppose, the world needs different gauges and a specially strong Lashing Gang.[20]

- [1] Letter to Prime Minister, 1940, Australian Archives
- [2] 'Fifth Columnists? German and Austrian Refugees in Australian Internment Camps '. On National Archives of Australia website under 'Frederick Watson Fellowship'
- [3] Alan Gill, 'How a Maori officer became a father figure to the "misfits"', *SMH*, 25.4.92
- [4] *Australian War Memorial 55 443/2/2*
- [5] An outstanding exception was the Captain of the 8th Employment Company, Edward Renata Broughton, a part-Maori beloved by the men of the 8th. See the entry in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 13.
- [6] *ibid* 2.8.40
- [7] *SMH* 3.8.40
- [8] *ibid* 6.2.42
- [9] Don Watson, Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1979, p.331
- [10] See for example National Archives of Australia Series 373 Item 7925/37
- [11] See for example *SMH* 1.8.40, and Watson *op cit*
- [12] *SMH* 13.10.40, 20.10.42
- [13] *Age* 14.3.42
- [14] *ibid* 11.5.42
- [15] Australian War Memorial 22/1/41, 33 Employment Company, January-June 1944
- [16] Alan Gill, *op cit*
- [17] Yosl Bergner, letter to 6th Employment Company reunion, 16th February. 1994
- [18] cited in Don Watson *op cit* p.127
- [19] *ibid*
- [20] Yosl Bergner, *op cit*

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