

= Operation Pamphlet =

Operation Pamphlet , also called Convoy Pamphlet , was a convoy operation of World War II conducted during January and February 1943 to transport the Australian Army 's 9th Division home from Egypt . The convoy involved five transports , which were protected from Japanese warships during their trip across the Indian Ocean and along the Australian coastline by several Allied naval task forces . The 9th Division boarded the ships during late January 1943 , and the convoy operation began on 4 February . No contact was made between Allied and Japanese ships , and the 9th Division arrived in Australian ports during late February with no losses from enemy action .

The operation was initiated after the British and United States governments agreed to the Australian Government 's request that the 9th Division be transferred to Australia , thereby ending the Second Australian Imperial Force 's role in the North African Campaign . The division had seen extensive combat in North Africa , but was needed to bolster the forces available for planned offensive operations in the Pacific . After its return to Australia , the 9th Division was retrained for jungle warfare and made an important contribution to operations conducted in New Guinea during late 1943 .

= = Background = =

During 1940 and 1941 , three infantry divisions and other units assigned to I Corps of the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were transported to the Middle East , where they took part in several campaigns against German , Italian and French forces . Following the outbreak of the Pacific War , the corps headquarters and the 6th and 7th Divisions were returned to Australia in early 1942 to bolster the country 's defences ; the movement of these troops was designated Operation Stepsister . The Australian Government agreed to British and US requests to temporarily retain the 9th Division in the Middle East in exchange for the deployment of additional United States Army units to Australia and Britain 's support for a proposal to expand the Royal Australian Air Force to 73 squadrons . That year , the 9th Division played an important role in the First Battle of El Alamein during July 1942 and the Second Battle of El Alamein between 23 October and 4 November . The division suffered many casualties during the latter engagement , and did not take part in the pursuit of the retreating Axis forces .

Several factors influenced the decision made by the Australian Government in October 1942 to recall the 9th Division to Australia . Firstly , the Government and the commander of the Australian Military Forces , General Thomas Blamey , wanted to relieve the 6th and 7th Divisions from combat in the New Guinea Campaign and Blamey considered the 9th Division to be better prepared for this responsibility than his militia forces or US Army units . Secondly , the commander of Allied forces in the South West Pacific Area , General Douglas MacArthur , had been pressing the US and Australian Governments for reinforcements to conduct offensive operations against Japanese positions . Other factors influencing the decision were a desire to concentrate the Australian Army in a single theatre , the increasing difficulty in finding replacements for the 9th Division 's casualties given the Army 's manpower shortages , the political difficulties associated with implementing reforms to permit militia units to serve outside Australian territory , and concerns that a prolonged absence from Australia would affect morale among the 9th Division 's soldiers .

On 17 October 1942 , Australian Prime Minister John Curtin cabled British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to request that the 9th Division be returned to Australia . In the cable Curtin stated that , owing to Australia 's manpower shortage and the demands of the war in the Pacific , it was no longer possible to provide enough reinforcements to sustain the division in the Middle East . The British Government initially resisted this request on the grounds that the 9th Division was required for the upcoming offensive at El Alamein . On 29 October (six days into the battle) Curtin again cabled Churchill , stating that Australia needed the division in the Pacific and in a fit state to participate in offensive operations . On 1 November , US President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote to Curtin proposing to send an additional army division to Australia if the Australian Government agreed to retain the 9th Division in the Middle East . Curtin , acting on the advice of MacArthur ,

responded to Roosevelt on 16 November rejecting this suggestion , and again requested that the 9th Division be returned .

On 21 November , the commander of the 9th Division , Major General Leslie Morshead , was informed by General Harold Alexander , the commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the Middle East Command , that a decision had been made to return the division to Australia . Churchill subsequently told the Australian Government on 2 December that while he was prepared to recommend to Roosevelt that the 9th Division be returned , the resultant diversion of shipping would reduce the size of the build @-@ up of United States military personnel in Britain and North Africa by 30 @,@ 000 men . In the same cable , Churchill also stated that due to a shortage of shipping the 9th Division 's heavy equipment would need to remain in the Middle East . On 3 December Roosevelt again wrote to Curtin to suggest that the 9th Division remain in the Middle East until the final defeat of the Axis forces in North Africa . Roosevelt also informed Curtin that the United States Army 's 25th Infantry Division would be transferred to Australia during December . Following these messages the Government sought advice from Blamey and MacArthur on whether it was necessary for the 9th Division to return with its heavy equipment , and was informed that the necessary supplies could be sourced from American resources once the unit arrived in Australia .

Curtin replied to Churchill and Roosevelt on 8 December , and again stressed the need to return the 9th Division to Australia as soon as possible to make good the Army 's losses to tropical diseases and prepare for future offensives in the Pacific . In his message he agreed to leave the division 's heavy equipment in the Middle East , and requested only that it travel with items necessary to quickly re @-@ enter combat in the South West Pacific . No further debate took place , and on 15 December Churchill informed Curtin that shipping would be made available in late January to transport the division and a small portion of its equipment to Australia .

= = Preparations = =

The 9th Division 's role in the Second Battle of El Alamein ended on 5 November 1942 . From 30 November the division travelled to Palestine by road , and all its units arrived there by 9 December . After settling into camps located between Gaza and Qastina , the 9th Division undertook a period of rebuilding and training , and many soldiers were granted leave . On 22 December , a formal parade involving the entire division was conducted at Gaza Airport .

Preparations to return the 9th Division to Australia began in late December 1942 . On 26 December , all of the AIF unit commanding officers in the Middle East were informed that their commands were to return to Australia ; the movement was code @-@ named " Liddington " . Tight security was instituted for this operation , and more junior personnel who needed to be informed of the move were told that their units were being transferred to Egypt . While many members of the AIF initially believed that they would take part in further fighting in the Mediterranean , as preparations continued it became obvious that the units were about to undertake a long sea voyage . The 9th Division 's artillery , tanks and other heavy equipment were transferred to ordnance depots during early January 1943 , and on the 16th of that month the division began moving to the Suez Canal area , from where it was to embark . The movement of the 9th Division took place in groups , each of which spent one or two days at a transit camp at Qassin where all vehicles were handed to British authorities .

The Royal Navy also made preparations for the movement of the 9th Division back to Australia in late 1942 . Four large troop ships were allocated to the task , and the British Chiefs of Staff Committee initially proposed to Churchill that they sail across the Indian Ocean without a protective escort . However , as the eastern Indian Ocean was within range of Japanese warships based at Singapore this was judged to be unacceptably risky , especially as it was not likely that the movement of so many soldiers could be kept secret . Moreover , transporting the division without an escort would have violated the long @-@ standing policy of assigning at least one capital ship to protect troop convoys in this region , and would not have been accepted by the Australian government . In November , the Chiefs of Staff Committee decided to allocate an escort to the convoy , but did not specify what it should comprise .

= = Voyage = =

= = = Indian Ocean = = =

The AIF began embarking on the troop ships on 24 January 1943 . The ships assigned to carry the troops home were the converted ocean liners Aquitania , Île de France , Nieuw Amsterdam and Queen Mary . The armed merchant cruiser HMS Queen of Bermuda provided escort , and also embarked 1 @, @ 731 Australian soldiers . As the Suez Canal ports were too small for the four troop ships to load simultaneously , the embarkation process was staged and the convoy 's five vessels sailed separately through the northern Red Sea and rendezvoused near Massawa in Eritrea . British destroyers HMS Pakenham , Petard , Derwent and Hero and the Greek destroyer Vasilissa Olga were transferred from the Mediterranean Fleet to guard the troop ships from attack by Japanese submarines as they passed through the Red Sea .

Queen Mary was the first ship to complete loading , and left Port Tewfik on 25 January . She anchored at Massawa three days later , and the soldiers on board endured very hot conditions until she resumed her journey . Aquitania was next to load , and embarked the entire 20th Brigade between 25 and 30 January . Île de France completed loading and departed Egypt on 28 January , and Nieuw Amsterdam and Queen of Bermuda sailed together on 1 February . Overall , 30 @, @ 985 Australians were embarked on Queen of Bermuda and the converted liners ; Aquitania carried 6 @, @ 953 , Île de France 6 @, @ 531 , Nieuw Amsterdam had 9 @, @ 241 on board and 9 @, @ 995 sailed on Queen Mary . A total of 622 AIF personnel remained in the Middle East after the five ships departed Egypt , but this figure was steadily reduced to below 20 by March 1943 .

The five ships of the convoy rendezvoused off Perim on the morning of 4 February , and passed Aden later that day . The destroyers left the convoy as it passed Cape Guardafui , and were replaced by the heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire and light cruiser HMS Gambia which were to serve as ocean escorts . Captain James Bisset , commander of the Queen Mary , served as the convoy commodore . The four large converted liners sailed in line abreast formation and Queen of Bermuda 's position varied based on the time of day and the situation . The convoy maintained a speed of 17 knots (31 km / h) ; while the liners typically sailed at much higher speeds during their independent voyages , they were constrained by the maximum which Queen of Bermuda could maintain .

After entering the Indian Ocean , the convoy sailed south @-@ east . The ships manoeuvred together in a zigzag course ; avoiding collisions during the frequent turns placed heavy demands on the watch @-@ keeping officers , who found their shifts exhausting . The troops endured very uncomfortable conditions on the crowded troop ships , but morale was high . They entertained themselves with sports , sun baking and gambling . The 9th Division 's officers enjoyed somewhat better conditions , which frustrated some of the other ranks . The convoy arrived at Addu Atoll on the evening of 9 February , and anchored there to refuel and take on supplies . This atoll served as a secret supply base for Allied ships in the Indian Ocean , and the Australian soldiers were not told where they were while the refuelling took place . The ships sailed again on the afternoon of 10 February .

A strong escort force was provided to guard the convoy as it travelled through the eastern Indian Ocean . For this , most dangerous , stage of the journey Force " A " of the British Eastern Fleet sailed near the troop ships . The force comprised the battleships HMS Warspite , Resolution and Revenge , as well as the light cruiser HMS Mauritius and six destroyers . The Australian soldiers were pleased to see so many warships sailing near their ships on 10 February , though Force A later patrolled over the horizon from the convoy . As the convoy neared the Western Australian port of Fremantle , its escort was reinforced by the Dutch cruisers HNLMS Jacob van Heemskerck and Tromp , as well as the destroyers HNLMS Tjerk Hiddes and Van Galen .

The ships arrived at Fremantle on 18 February . Nieuw Amsterdam and Queen of Bermuda berthed in Fremantle Harbour , and the other three troop ships dropped anchor at Gage Roads . The Western Australian members of the 9th Division were disembarked , and the ships loaded supplies

and mail . As Queen of Bermuda left the convoy at Fremantle , her remaining 517 passengers were transferred to Nieuw Amsterdam . This resulted in considerable overcrowding on board the liner for the remainder of her voyage .

= = = Australian waters = = =

The Australian Government was concerned about the safety of the troop ships in Australian waters . At a meeting held on 17 February , the Advisory War Council considered recommending that the soldiers be moved to the east coast by rail . It decided against this option after being informed that , due to the limited capacity of the Trans @-@ Australian Railway , it would take several months to move the 30 @,@ 000 personnel . Instead , the council recommended that the convoy continue but be given " the maximum protection possible " . Due to the presence of Japanese submarines off the Australian coast , tight security measures were instituted after the convoy arrived at Fremantle ; civilian communications between Western Australia and the east coast were cut off for several days , and Curtin asked the media to not report the movement of the 9th Division . As part of a confidential briefing on 24 February , Curtin told journalists that he had not slept well for three weeks due to concerns for the safety of the convoy .

When the convoy sailed from Fremantle on 20 February it was escorted by the Australian light cruiser HMAS Adelaide , as well as Jacob van Heemskerck and Tjerk Hiddes . It met the ships of Task Group 44 @.@ 3 on 24 February in the Great Australian Bight . This force comprised the heavy cruiser HMAS Australia and American destroyers USS Bagley , Helm and Henley , and had been dispatched from Sydney on 17 February to escort the troop ships . Adelaide and the Dutch warships left the convoy shortly afterwards to escort Nieuw Amsterdam into Melbourne ; the liner docked there on the afternoon of 25 February . Task Group 44 @.@ 3 escorted the remaining ships to Sydney , passing south of Tasmania . The escort was strengthened by Jacob van Heemskerck and the French destroyer Triomphant en route . The three converted liners arrived at Sydney on 27 February 1943 , completing Operation Pamphlet without loss . Despite the official secrecy concerning the convoy , large crowds assembled on vantage points around Sydney Harbour to watch the ships arrive . Queen Mary anchored off Bradleys Head and the other two liners berthed at Woolloomooloo . Curtin officially announced that the 9th Division had returned to Australia in a speech delivered to the House of Representatives on 23 March .

After disembarking , all members of the 9th Division were given three weeks leave . The men were then assembled in their home state capital and took part in a welcome home march ; these marches were conducted to acknowledge the division 's service in the Middle East and advertise a war loan drive . Following the marches the division re @-@ assembled at training camps on the Atherton Tableland in far North Queensland where it was to be retrained for jungle warfare . The 9th Division next saw action against Japanese forces during the Salamaua ? Lae campaign in September 1943 ; had the division not returned from the Middle East , at least part of this task would have fallen to less experienced Militia units .

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