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PACIFIC SPRINGBOARD

Led by a fighting, two-fisted Prime Minister, Australia today is the jumping-off place for our forces in the South Seas

by HENRY C. WOLFE

"IF AUSTRALIA is invaded, we'll fight them at sea; we'll fight them on the beaches; we'll turn our cities and towns into fortresses; we'll still wage the battle from our forests, our sheep stations, our mountains, and our deserts. Every man, woman, and child will fight. And we'll never stop as long as there's one Australian left!"

John Curtin, Australia's colorful Prime Minister, leaned toward me and pounded home his words. They came with double force, because I remembered that this fighting leader had opposed Australia's entry into World War I as vehemently as he was now supporting his country's last-ditch participation in this one. For denouncing the late conflict as a "capitalistic war" and opposing conscription he had been sent to prison for treasonable utterances. And now, paradoxically, he was waging a fight to the last man in "the battle for freedom."

He pointed out to me that Australia is in the front line now. Her security and her way of life are threatened. The Japanese have pushed deep southward toward her iron, timber, wool, and meat. Japanese control of "white Australia" would mean Japanese control of the South Pacific sea lanes.

I realized more clearly than ever before how crucially important Australia is to the United States. It is part of America's life line. Lose Australia, and the Western Pacific will be virtually closed to us.

Australia is democracy's last bastion in the South Pacific. No doubt, as I write these words our ships, planes, and

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troops are in Australia. It is from this island continent base that we must launch our big counteroffensive against Japan. If Australia stands, our warfare in the Pacific will be immeasurably easier. It will cost us far less in men and machines.

And that is why I saw in square-jawed, direct-spoken John Curtin our indispensable ally. As Prime Minister of the Commonwealth he directs its defense program. As the spark plug of Australia's fight for democracy, he is a key figure in the strategy of the Pacific.

He is a man of action. Sixty minutes after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor he was sending out this declaration: "From one hour ago Australia has been at war with the Japanese Empire!" After the fall of Singapore, he declared: "Our honeymoon is finished. It is now fight or work as never before. Every citizen has a parallel duty with that of the fighting forces."

But long before Pearl Harbor and Singapore he had helped to make Australia a miracle of war efficiency and valor. On half a dozen far-flung fronts her jaunty, smiling young "Diggers" had fought with legendary dash and courage, while at home an agricultural commonwealth had remade itself into an industrial arsenal.

Almost overnight the Aussies changed their sheep pastures into gun factories, their wheat fields into airplane plants, their desert wastes into shipyards. Stockmen became toolmakers. Wool shearers learned to make gun sights. Dairy hands switched to riveting. Timber workers got the hang of laying keel plates. The easygoing, peace-loving individualists "down under" regimented themselves to make wool-growing Australia a strong military and naval base for the armies and fleets of their allies.

AUSTRALIA is as big as the United States. It has 11,300 miles of coast line. But its trackless desert reaches, its thousand-acre ranches, its bush, and its cities hardly muster 7,000,000 people—about equal to the population of New York City. How these 7,000,000 have armed to defend their continent while sending 170,000 soldiers overseas, is a thrilling industrial romance.

Until the middle of 1939 there was not one airplane factory in all Australia. Now the native airplane industry is turning out all its

own training ships and sending some away to other British pilots. It is making bombers and is all set for early production of pursuit planes. When Hitler's legions blasted Poland there was only one shipyard "down under." Now there are 7 shipyards building destroyers, corvettes, small boats, and 9,000-ton freighters. In two years 20 munitions towns have sprung up over the countryside. At least 50 firms are making antitank guns. In uniform and in mufti there are a million and a half citizens of the happy-go-lucky, horse-racing, hard-betting Commonwealth.

The head of this prodigious war effort must have something, I thought. He's worth the long trip to the South Pacific. So down I went from the Netherlands East Indies to see John Curtin. In Canberra, Australia's gardenlike capital, I learned why the Aussies have made him their war leader. They had to have a dynamic man who held the confidence of the common people, who knew the problems of both industry and labor, and who could get things done. Above all, they had to have a fighter. John Curtin, long a leader of the Labor party, was that man.

When I met the Prime Minister I was instantly impressed by his simplicity. He is fifty-seven years old. Graying, bespectacled, with clean-cut features, athletic figure, and conservative business dress, he might easily pass for an American. He likes sports, especially swimming and walking, and enjoys an occasional game of bridge. He has to watch his diet. He smokes cigarettes, but does not drink. He puts on no side, and neither seeks nor shuns publicity. He can be emphatic without ranting. Give him a cup of tea and a spell of leisure, and he loves a chat. He points up his remarks with quotations from the older English poets.

The Prime Minister is a devoted family man. The Curtins have two children—a daughter twenty-two and a son twenty. The latter is serving in the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force). The family has made its home in Cottesloe, Western Australia, for the last twenty-four years.

Curtin has come up the hard way. He was born in Creswick, an old worked-out gold-mining town in Victoria. His father, a police sergeant, was stricken with rheumatism when the son was ten, and John Curtin had to leave school and go to work. He got a job as an apprentice with Creswick's little weekly newspaper, and soon grew to love the smell of printer's ink. From 1917 till his election to Parliament in 1928 he was editor of *The Westralian Worker*.

After the job of printer's apprentice he went to work in a pottery, then in a canister factory. After that he became a timber worker. But it was not all work and no play for the brawny young Australian. He was an ace cricketer, and snagged many a pass in the football games of Melbourne.

Meanwhile, he became interested in politics, joined the Socialist Club, and at the age of twenty-six he was elected secretary of the timber workers' union.

When World War I got under way the young Labor official wanted Australia to stay out of it. For his antiwar activities he was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. It was during this period of eclipse that he met a girl Laborite as zealous as himself. She became Mrs. Curtin.

"Do you consider this war different from the other one?" I asked Mr. Curtin.

"I do," he replied with characteristic directness. "I still think that the first World War was caused by international capitalism. But this conflict is a people's war for freedom. We are waging this conflict to keep the world from becoming a great Axis-

dominated slave state."

As the leader of Australian Labor, Curtin saw this war coming years before Hitler invaded Poland. Six years ago he was urging a strong aviation program on Australia. "We haven't the wealth to build a great navy," he argued, "but for the price of one battleship we can build a fleet of bombers and fighters to protect our coasts."

His words fell on deaf ears. His political opponents placed their faith in the British fleet. Britain would never stand by, they said, and allow anybody to attack Australia.

"All well enough," countered Curtin, "but the day may come when Britain will be so busy defending her own coasts that she can't do much to protect ours." His prophetic words came only too true when France fell.

WHEN World War II broke out, Australia had some 3,700 men in her army. Today, thanks largely to Curtin's leadership, there are at least 61,000 men in her air force alone. Then, there were 5,000 men in the Royal Australian Navy. Today there are 20,000. These two branches and the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) are volunteer services. There is also a home defense force of nearly a quarter million. Aussie soldiers and airmen have fought with magnificent gallantry in France, Libya, Crete, Greece, Palestine, Syria, and Malaya. Her doughty little fleet has campaigned in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and throughout the South Pacific.

Australia's fighting power and high morale helped galvanize the Allied will to victory. She decided to make herself over *at once* from an agricultural country into an independent producer of the machines of modern war. She would feed, clothe, and equip her own fighters—possibly others of Britain's armies. In boldness of conception and scope of execution this must remain one of history's most moving industrial achievements.

Twenty years' work in two!—That was just about the job that Australia set for herself. And quietly and quickly she has done it.

Australians reminded you that theirs was the only country in the world on whose soil no battle had ever been fought. Prewar Australia was a country of timber, mines, and sheep. She was helplessly dependent on England for manufactured goods. She mined gold, silver, zinc, copper, antimony, lead, iron, and coal. Out of the fabulous store of her natural resources she shipped

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wool, leather, wheat, canned fruit, butter, cheese, beef, and mutton to Britain. She still does. There was only enough manufacturing to keep 30 per cent of her citizens busy. Seventy per cent of them had no industrial training. The prospects for quick industrialization were not encouraging.

PLANNING, co-ordination, and ingenuity —these are the wands which the Commonwealth waved for speedy magic. The beginning was unpretentious. In 1938 she built annexes to some 27 factories.

After the outbreak of war this modest nucleus mushroomed into a gigantic industrial growth. Boom towns have sprung up over the once lonely countryside. Built around defense industries, these communities are Australia's guarded, secret towns.

The Aussies showed me how the Kangaroo has sprouted wings. The Commonwealth's aviation industry, established late in 1939, counts on having 3,000 Australian-built warplanes in the air by the end of 1942. The Wirraway (dive bomber) and Beaufort (torpedo bomber) are old-line products now. Next on the schedule may be the long-range Wackett fighter bomber.

Chief triumph of the gun industry is the Bren gun, which requires over 70,000 tools and gauges in the making. The bulletproof Bren gun carrier and the antiaircraft gun are being turned out in increasing numbers. Production has been started on the remarkable, inexpensive Owen sub-machine gun.

The Australians now have factories that produce precision lenses, parachutes, gas masks, radio equipment, predictors for antiaircraft guns, pontoon bridges, range finders, telescopic gun sights, tank periscopes, gun cotton, munitions, barbed wire, and other essentials for the modern war machine. In addition to feeding, clothing, and equipping her own troops, Australia is sending foodstuffs, clothing, boots, and munitions to the British and the Allies in the Near East, Middle East, and Far East.

Obstacles only served to challenge the resourcefulness of the neophyte industrialists. As the European war progressed, the Australians could no longer import machine tools. They could not even buy detailed drawings of some tools. Nothing daunted, they managed to copy them from catalogue illustrations. Today, 130 Australian plants can turn out machine tools.

Manufacturers of precision instruments found it impossible to procure optical glass, primary war requirement. University and government scientists joined industry in experiments that resulted in excellent glass. They will soon be making it for export.

Australia's famous bulletproof steel of Newcastle called for alloys prohibitive in cost and increasingly hard to import. In late 1940 the hard-pressed metallurgists of the Commonwealth revolutionized the manufacturing process, producing a steel that re-

quires no imported alloys. What is more, it is so malleable that it can be welded instead of riveted.

World War II is a conflict in which it takes 20 men in industry behind the lines to maintain one man at the front. Without the patriotic co-operation of labor, Australia's revolutionary defense program would have been little more than a visionary's blueprint.

Australia is Labor's paradise. Every one of her workers belongs to a union. There are 1,000,000 trade unionists, one out of every 7 Aussies. "Labor is not a class movement," Curtin said to me. "It belongs to the whole people."

When Hitler lashed out at the democracies, Curtin was a member of Parliament and head of the Labor opposition party. But the Australian in him dominated the Laborite. "Winning the war must come first," he admonished a die-hard colleague. "The party is second. Australian Labor is under no illusions regarding its fate if Hitler triumphs."

The brunt of the defense expansion fell on the experienced industrial workers. They learned new skills from artisans brought in from Britain, shipbuilding technicians particularly. They worked overtime, waived their prewar union rights and practices. They took in the green farm hands and the raw timbermen as pupil workers. Veteran mechanics gave after-hours rudimentary instruction in night and day schools for the former wool shearers and daily workers. Old and new hands vied in pledging "gifts of working hours" to speed up the arms program. On Christmas Day they toiled as usual at their benches and machines.

The smart-stepping Australian women fell in line behind Curtin, too. Now there are women serving with the AIF, not only as nurses, but as clerical and routine workers. The women pilots, telegraphers, teleprinters, and clerks of the RAAF auxiliary were early given full military rank. Motorcycle dispatch riding, servicing of warplane engines, truck driving, are among the hundreds of war jobs shouldered by the women Aussies. They have proved themselves versatile and efficient in munitions plants and war supply factories. A denim-uniformed corps has been trained to fill in the shortage of agricultural workers.

ANOTHER spectacular trick in the defense sleight-of-hand was the transformation of Port Darwin. Some 2,393 miles from Sydney, this northern coastal town had been an isolated little pearling port, garrisoned by 120 soldiers. Japanese strategists used to belittle it as a base because the Australians could reach it only by sea. When war shocked the Aussies into defense-mindedness in 1939 their hurry-up experts got to work on the problem. In three months they built a 636-mile all-weather road down across the deserts of central Australia, giving Darwin a land short cut to the country's supply centers and war industry.

In early 1940 things began to happen in Darwin. Over "Australia's Burma Road" sped long truck convoys with labor battalions, equipment, and supplies. Military and naval barracks sprang up in the port. An airfield and naval wharves spread out on a generous scale. Shore batteries and anti-aircraft batteries mounted guard. Then the troops took over. And, ever since, "Diggers" bound for overseas service have traveled "north to the east" through Darwin. It was by way of this antipodal base that American bombers pioneered a southern route to the Philippines before the Japanese blitzed Hawaii.

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Back of Port Darwin stretches the wild jungle and the mangrove swamps of the Australian bush. Deep in this terrain is buried a veritable Maginot Line of subterranean dressing stations, garages, and communication centers, underground hangars, runways, and fuel tanks. Our AEF will find the Aussies perfect hosts when it comes to providing hospitable reserve shelter in the South Pacific.

"Australia has now obtained the closest association and co-operation with America," Prime Minister Curtin said to me.

THE Aussies like Americans. Australians look, act, and think like us. An American feels at home in their cities. They favor our movies, pastimes, and books. At a variety show in Brisbane one evening I heard an American girl singing hillbilly songs receive more applause than any of the Australians on the program.

John Curtin has let the world know what he thinks of us. "Australia looks to America . . ." is his message. "We shall exert our energy toward shaping a plan, with the United States as its keystone."

John Curtin is leaving no doubt that Australia is our ally, materially and spiritually. The Australians are one with us in a tradition of freedom and democracy. Now we are fighting close together to preserve that tradition.