

## **FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS IN WAR TIME**

**ROGER LONDON**

There were some 6 million inhabitants; the Comptoir d'Escompte financed purchases of wool and wheat, of which France was the principal foreign buyer; the French colony numbered about 2 thousand souls; their paper, *Le Courier Australien*, was established before the century's turn.

When General Mobilization was declared (military service is compulsory in France) available Reservists were mobilized to Indo-China. The majority were wool buyers; I was a junior executive in the wheat trade.

We travelled on the s/s "Pierre Loti", of the Messageries, the sole direct link between Sydney and Saigon.

First posted with Anti Aircraft Defences at Hanoi, the capital, I witnessed (July 1940) the arrival, in an aircraft not figuring on our "Carnets de Silhouettes", of General Nishihara's mission come to seek free passage through North Indochina of General Sumita's Canton Army in view of its evacuation through the port of Haiphong.

I was then seconded to the French Embassy in Tokyo, where negotiations were taking place against a threatened invasion of Indochina by Siam, when news reached us (September 1940) that General Sumita had forced his way through the frontier post of Dong Dang, after slaughtering the garrison in a surprise night attack. The Emperor protested; he was overwhelmed by the industrial-military complex intent on conquering a Co-Prosperity Sphere defended in the East by a chain of "unsinkable" aircraft-carriers stretching, through the Marianas, to the South Pacific (and the Australian North-East Region).

The Dong Dang Incident marked the extension of the war to the Pacific Zone; the American Ambassador, Mr Joseph Crew, advised his compatriots to leave Japan; an attack against the "sinkable" U.S. carriers was now expected when the War Party gained domination of the Cabinet (this took place in October).

Demobilized in the Spring, the Reservists found themselves stranded: the "Pierre Loti" had been seized at Sydney, to be transferred to the Blue Funnel Line. Some made their way through Hong Kong; another group through Manila, the rest through Shanghai. I sailed with the "Tokyo Maru" from Yokohama; she turned out to be the last ship to Australia (July 1941).

But our comrade, Reserve Lieutenant Paul Robin, wool buyer, of Sydney, had been killed by Japanese fire near the Chinese border.

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By then, a Delegation of the French National Committee in London was functioning in Sydney under André Brenac, wool buyer, supported by a Central Committee and Albert Sourdin's *Le Courrier Australien*, as well as a Consulate General.

In Melbourne, the Consulate had been closed by its titular head, Frank Puaux, who had rallied Free French Headquarters in Noumea. Defence of French interests now rested de facto with the Victorian Committee (Professor A.R. Chisholm, Président d'Honneur), led by Jean Legrand, wool buyer, to which I was appointed executive secretary. Mesdames Andrée McDonald, Pohl and Taylor carried the Free French Crusade to women, under Mme Taylor's stirring, recorded march "Battez les Cœurs!".

In March 1942, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, C.I.C. French Territories in the Pacific, asked the Delegation to endeavour to start an independent service in co-operation with the Australian Broadcasting Commission. I was assigned the task and began broadcasting at the Commission's Bourke Street Studio 303, under the aegis of Miss Grace Martin (Department of Information) and the ferrule of Mr MacMahon Ball, Director of Short Wave Services.

Admiral d'Argenlieu arrived in Melbourne at the end of August.

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Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, in religion Pierre de la Trinité, Provincial of the Paris Region in the Order of Carmel, had seen service

against German U-Boats in 1914-1918; he had then joined the Order and had become Head Teacher of Spirituality at the Paris Catholic Institute when he was called to the Colours as a member of Naval Reserve and posted to the naval base at Cherbourg. Captured during the Guerre-Eclair and on his way to captivity in Germany by train, he had succeeded in escaping and joined General de Gaulle in London, where the Cross of Lorraine was adopted both as a tribute to Joan of Arc and the traditional emblem of the Duchy's resistance to German ambitions<sup>1</sup> (The original Cross, dating to the Fourth Century, is kept at the Hospice de Baugé in the Maine et Loire Department.)

In September, Captain d'Argenlieu spearheaded the unsuccessful Franco-British attempt against Dakar (where he was wounded), then led the expedition which rallied Gabon to Free French Africa (capital, Brazzaville, seat of Radio-Brazzaville, Poste National Français). Promoted to membership of the Council of the Empire with the rank of Rear-Admiral, he was sent on a general mission to Canada and the United States, then appointed to the French National Committee and nominated in the dual capacity of Civil and Military Commander in the French Pacific Zone.

Admiral d'Argenlieu came to Sydney in August 1942 on board his flagship "Le Triomphant", which had just completed a series of pre-emptive rescue missions in Australia's North-East Region.

After Sydney, the Admiral was received in Melbourne by Professor Chisholm and the various civil and military representatives of French-Australian common interests. He then paid his official call to Canberra on behalf of the Comité National representing now La France Combattante, unitary Command of the Free French Movement and the Resistance in France. The following Communiqué was then issued by the Australian Government.

**Copy of Government Communiqué dated  
6th September, 1942.**

**FOR THE PRESS**

Following a conference between the Minister for External Affairs (Dr. H.V. Evatt) and Rear-Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, Member of the French National Committee (Comité National Français), the governing body (directing organ) of Fighting France, and the Committee's Delegate for the Pacific, the Minister for External Affairs said to-day that the visit of Admiral d'Argenlieu to Australia had been very successful and in many respects had furthered the mutual interests of Australia and the French Pacific possessions.

The Commonwealth Government regarded the French National Committee under the presidency of General de Gaulle whose seat was now in London as the body responsible for the administration of all French territories and possessions (wherever they might be) which had rallied to Fighting France.

In regard to matters in which the collaboration of Fighting France was involved, the Commonwealth Government would continue in the future as in the past to treat with the French National Committee or other governing body (directing organ) for the time being of Fighting France. In accordance with this the Commonwealth Government had formally noted the appointment, as the Delegate in Australia of the French National Committee, of M. André Brenac, who in such capacity acted in matters concerning the interests in Australia of Fighting France. The functions that M. Brenac now exercised as Delegate in Australia included the issue of passports and visas and other administrative formalities concerning Frenchmen who adhered to Fighting France.

Ever since French Territories in the Pacific had rallied to Fighting France, said Dr Evatt, the Commonwealth Government had done everything possible to aid the defence of those territories, particularly New Caledonia. Indeed, Australia had had an Official Representative in New Caledonia since August, 1940, with a special mission to promote co-operation and to render assistance to the administration. The Commonwealth Government took early action to maintain the economic and financial stability of the colony, and it was the first Government

to provide direct military assistance for the defence of New Caledonia.

On the other hand, the governing body of Fighting France had rendered the greatest practical assistance to the United Nations. For this it had earned the undying gratitude of the Australian people and of all those who were fighting for freedom. To-day, over 80,000 Frenchmen were fighting side by side with the Allied Nations in the various theatres of war. Fighting France, by its efforts and energy, had firmly established its authority and prestige over all the territories, particularly the French Pacific possessions, which had renounced the Vichy Government.

Indeed, respect for the sovereignty of France and the French Empire and the eventual restoration of France as a world power would be mainly due to those Fighting Frenchmen like General de Gaulle and Rear-Admiral d'Argenlieu who, in the dark shadow of the calamity which overtook their homeland in 1940, had determined to fight on until those who had ravaged the sacred soil of France were finally overthrown.

There now remained to select a Representative with Consular Attributions in Melbourne (the fate of the official archives has been described in *Explorations*, n° 9).

While in Tokyo, I had met François Perrier, a leading member of the local Free French Movement, detached by the Aviation Company Gnome et Rhone, specializing in air-cooled, radial engines, to the Japanese aircraft industry. When Japan joined the Axis Powers in the spring, therefore causing a threat to the Movement, I urged him to follow me to Melbourne and place his experience at the service of the Australian War Industry.

This he did, accompanied by his technical assistant and their families, while stopping first at Hong Kong, then at Manila and Singapore in order to warn the unbelieving British and American military authorities of the real state of the Japanese Air Force.