

*Who was Vernon Sturdee?*¹

Lieutenant-General Sir Vernon Sturdee KBE CB DSO, President of the Institute in 1939-40, was twice Chief of the General Staff, commanded the First Australian Army in New Guinea in 1944-45 and took the Japanese surrender at Rabaul in 1945.

Vernon Ashton Hobart Sturdee was born in Frankston, Victoria, in 1890 into a distinguished military family. He was educated at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School before becoming an apprentice engineer. He joined the Militia as a sapper in 1908 and was commissioned after nine months. He transferred to the Royal Australian Engineers, Permanent Military Forces, as a lieutenant in 1911.

He transferred to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in 1914, was promoted to captain and landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 as Adjutant, 1st Divisional Engineers. From September to December, now a major commanding 5th Field Company, 2nd Division, he controlled the engineering and mining work at Steele's, Quinn's and Courtney's posts.

Sent to France in June 1916 commanding 8th Field Company, 5th Division, Sturdee was commended for the 'skill and energy' with which he prepared for major operations near Armentières and became Commander Royal Engineers, Franks Force, in September-October. For his work in 1915-16, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). In February 1917, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel and given command of the 4th Pioneer Battalion. In November, he became Commander Royal Engineers, 5th Division. He was seconded in March 1918 to British General Headquarters, France, and gained invaluable experience in the conduct of large-scale operations. Returning to Australia in 1919, he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and twice mentioned in dispatches for his Great War service.

Between the wars, Sturdee undertook staff and instructional duties in Australia and London,

attended the Staff College at Quetta, India (1922-23), and the Imperial Defence College, London (1931). In Australia in the 1930s, he became Director of Military Intelligence and Operations, and Assistant Secretary (Military) to the Council of Defence, and was promoted to colonel. He was primarily concerned with the operational aspects of plans to mobilise forces to defend Australia and to raise other formations to serve overseas. In 1938, he became Director of Staff Duties and was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1939.

Following the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Sturdee was promoted to lieutenant-general and appointed General Officer Commanding Eastern Command, Sydney, and Commander 2nd Military District. He prepared local defences and took charge of raising, accommodating, training and equipping 2nd AIF units in New South Wales. He also became President of

the United Service Institution of New South Wales (USI 1939-40). On 1 July 1940, he readily accepted demotion to major-general on his appointment as commander of the 8th Division, but his pleasure in having been given an operational command was to be brief.

Almost two months later, he became Chief of the General Staff (CGS) on 30 August 1940 following the death of the then CGS, General Sir Brudenell White, in an aeroplane crash earlier that month. As CGS, Sturdee, now a lieutenant-general again, was also first military member of the Military Board and head of the Australian Section of the Imperial General Staff. A 'gifted officer', Sturdee was well qualified for his role as principal military adviser to the government. He oversaw the expansion of the AIF and the Militia, encouraged the local

production of munitions, formulated plans to meet a southward thrust by the Japanese, developed coastal and anti-aircraft defences, and initiated a vast works programme.

When Japan entered the war in December 1941, Sturdee found himself obliged to deploy inadequate



*Lieutenant-General V. A. H. Sturdee CB CBE DSO
Chief of the General Staff, 1947*

[Source: National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG x85405]

¹This is an abridged version of Wood (2002) augmented by material from the archives of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales (the Institute), contained within the Institute's Ursula Davidson Library.

forces to outposts north of Australia, only to see them lost in futile and costly operations. Nonetheless, he correctly advocated that Port Moresby be held as the base for a counter-attack in Papua and New Guinea.

Between the wars, Sturdee had questioned the wisdom of relying on the British base in Singapore for Australia's security. On 15 February 1942, the day Singapore fell, he submitted a paper that dealt with the future employment of the AIF. Observing that, in the war against Japan, 'we have violated the principle of the concentration of forces in our efforts to hold numerous small localities', he concluded that Australia was the only suitable strategic base from where the Allies could take the offensive against the Japanese. The immediate problem was to protect Australia from invasion. To that end, the 7th Division, which was *en route* to the Far East, and the remainder of the AIF in the Middle East should be brought home. He threatened to resign if the government rejected his advice, but Prime Minister Curtin agreed with him. While Curtin took on Churchill and Roosevelt to prevent the 7th Division from being sent to Burma, Sturdee firmly maintained his position against the views of the chiefs of staff in London and Washington.

In 1942, following the appointments of Blamey as Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces, and MacArthur as Supreme Commander, South-West Pacific Area, Sturdee was appointed to head the Australian Military Mission to Washington. In Washington, he forcefully brought Australia's requirements to the attention of the Combined Chiefs of Staff and established the right of direct access to General George Marshall, Chief of the United States Army. Sturdee was appointed a Companion of the Bath (CB) in 1943.

In March 1944, Sturdee returned to Australia and took command of the First Australian Army in New Guinea. From his headquarters at Lae, he directed the operations of 110,000 personnel engaged in fighting the Japanese between the Solomon Islands in the east and the border with the Netherlands New Guinea in the west. Those who served under him found him to be 'a wise and tolerant commander who gave clear orders'

and left his subordinates 'to get on with the job whilst he did his utmost to see that they were adequately supported'. At a ceremony on board HMS *Glory* at Rabaul, New Britain, on 6 September 1945, he accepted the surrender of all Japanese forces in his area. The signed copy of the Instrument of Surrender which Sturdee retained, is on display in the Institute's Ursula Davidson Library. It was provided by his daughter via Colonel Don Swiney MBE (Ret'd).

On 1 December 1945, Sturdee succeeded Blamey as Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces. Four months later, he resumed the duties of Chief of the General Staff. He oversaw the repatriation and demobilisation of the wartime army; organised the Australian component of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force, Japan; established the Australian Regular Army; and reconstituted the Citizen Military Forces. To meet future military requirements, he strongly supported efforts to retain the industrial capacity that Australia had developed during the war. On 17 April 1950, he was placed on the Retired List.

In 1951, he was appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE). He became a director of Standard Telephones & Cables Pty. Ltd. and Honorary Colonel (1951-56) of the Royal Corps of Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. He died on 25 May 1966 at the Repatriation General Hospital, Heidelberg; and was accorded a full military funeral.

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