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Sir Frederick Shedden: The Forerunner

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Sir Frederick Shedden occupies an interesting and perhaps unique place in any consideration of the great mandarins of the Commonwealth Public Service who flourished, exercised their power, and helped to build modern Australia in the quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War.¹ In many respects he fitted neatly into this characterisation – he was the secretary of the Department of Defence from 1937 until 1956; he wielded great power in the Defence group of departments; he was a key adviser to the prime minister; and he helped shape many of the instruments of government. But in other respects he was different. Unlike his contemporaries from this period, he had been secretary of his department since 1937, that is from before the Second World War. Although he had almost completed a university degree in commerce, he was not especially concerned with economic issues. By the mid-1950s, his power and influence were waning, and he stepped down as departmental secretary almost two years before he formally retired. Further, unlike other mandarins, he refused to move permanently to Canberra, and worked in Melbourne for his entire career.

While it might be debated as to whether Shedden was actually one of the legendary seven dwarfs he was, arguably, the greatest public servant of his time. Whether he was the greatest ever, is another matter. Some would give that accolade to Sir Robert Garran, the joint author of the classic treatise on the new Commonwealth Constitution (1901). Garran was a close adviser to the prime minister, W.M. Hughes, during the First World War and was secretary of the Attorney-General's Department for an unrivalled period of 31 years – from 1901 to 1932.² Shedden's eminence relates only partly to his long 19 years as secretary. It is true that Garran, Sir Roland Wilson and Sir Arthur Tange – each of whom was a permanent head for some 20 years – served for a longer period, and many others served well beyond 10 years: Sir Kenneth Bailey, Sir

1 This paper is based on D. Horner, *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

2 Sir Kenneth Bailey, a later secretary of the Attorney-General's Department, wrote that Garran was 'revered in his lifetime as one ... of the Fathers of Federation. His repute as the wise and trusted legal counsellor of successive Federal Governments, moreover, became almost a legend'. K.H. Bailey, 'Sir Robert Garran', *The Australian Quarterly*, xxix, no. 1 (March 1957): 11.

Henry Bland and Sir Richard Kingsland each served for 18 years, although, except for Bailey, they all served in more than one department. To put their achievements in perspective, Professor R.N. Spann, an expert on Australian public administration, writing in 1979, noted that even 'in 1965, at a time of great government stability, Commonwealth permanent heads had only occupied that position in their existing department for an average of 5.5 years; in mid-1975 it was only 2.7 years'.³

Shedden's importance relates primarily to the fact that he was defence secretary during all of the Second World War, the onset of the Cold War, the Korean War and the early part of the Malayan Emergency, rather than to the longevity of his tenure. During the Second World War, prime ministers Robert Menzies and John Curtin also held the Defence portfolios and Shedden was their key adviser. As well as heading his department, Shedden became secretary of the War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council and was thus the principal coordinator of the war effort. He probably had more influence over the running of the government's main business for a longer period of time than any other public servant; and the government's main business – the conduct of the Second World War – was the biggest enterprise in Australian history. The fact that Shedden's influence had declined by the mid-1950s should not detract from his wartime achievements.

Education of a public servant

Shedden was a public servant from the old pre-war school. Educated at Kyneton State School and Kyneton Grammar School, in Victoria, he was placed fourth out of 300 candidates in the Commonwealth Public Service examination, and began work in the Department of Defence, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, in March 1910. He was aged 16. Apart from service abroad he worked at the barracks in the same government department until 1971, that is, for 61 years. It is a record unlikely ever to be matched.

In his own time he gained accountancy qualifications and also learned shorthand, but the heavy workload caused by the outbreak of the First World War forced him to terminate studies for a law degree at the University of Melbourne. Promoted in the finance section, he arranged a temporary exchange with a member of the pay staff of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) headquarters in London, and he served briefly in France. By December 1917 he was back in Australia and was discharged from the AIF. In later years he was proud of this very limited military experience.

3 R.N. Spann, *Government Administration in Australia* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 331.



Sir Frederick Shedden (centre) with Prime Minister John Curtin and Mrs Curtin, 1944

Source: National Archives of Australia, A5954, 661/12

Shedden was promoted further within the Defence finance section, while he almost completed, part-time, a commerce degree at the University of Melbourne. The Professor of Economics, Douglas Copland, was so impressed that he offered Shedden a scholarship to undertake postgraduate studies, but a major change in Shedden's career prevented him taking up this opportunity. In December 1927 he sailed to Britain to attend the Imperial Defence College. Shedden was the first Australian civilian to attend the Imperial Defence College, which had opened in 1927 and took senior military and civilian officers from across the Empire for its year-long course. He established a friendship with the college's commandant, Vice-Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, who reported that Shedden had worked 'indefatigably' and had entered into all studies with 'acuteness and zeal'.⁴ Shedden was one of the few public servants of his era who received formal training to prepare him to take on leadership of his department. Indeed, this was probably only possible in the Defence Department but, even then, few public servants received this opportunity.

⁴ Imperial Defence College, Confidential Report on Mr F.G. Shedden, 19 December 1928, National Archives of Australia (NAA) A5954, 46/21.

After the course, Shedden spent nine months in London preparing a paper on the principles of imperial defence with special reference to Australia, and studying British public expenditure, under the tutorship of Dr Hugh Dalton, later British minister for economic warfare during the Second World War. Returning to Melbourne in October 1929, he became secretary of the Defence Committee, which included the Chiefs of Staff of the three services. He witnessed the efforts of the new Labor Government led by James Scullin to cut costs during the Depression and took part in the debates between senior Naval and Army officers over the most appropriate strategy for the defence of Australia. Shedden was an advocate of imperial defence, which relied on building up the Navy so that it could cooperate with the Royal Navy in time of threat.

In 1932, following the defeat of the Labor Government, the new external affairs minister, John Latham, was nominated to attend the League of Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva. Shedden accompanied him as his assistant, but Latham was absent for much of the meeting and Shedden acted in his stead. Shedden was also secretary to the Australian delegation at the World Monetary and Economic Conference in London. In addition, he was appointed the Australian representative in the British Cabinet Office and Committee of Imperial Defence, where he established a friendship with the legendary Sir Maurice Hankey, who showed him how power could be wielded behind the scenes and taught him which sort of organisations needed to be developed to manage a nation's security policies.

Back in Australia in September 1933, Shedden resumed work with the Defence Committee and accompanied Hankey during the British official's visit to Australia in 1934. Shedden tried to model himself on Hankey and was later nicknamed 'the pocket hanky'. In November 1936 Shedden became first assistant secretary and prepared the Defence Department's briefing papers for the 1937 Imperial Conference in London. The Australian delegation included the prime minister, Joseph Lyons, the defence minister, Sir Archdale Parkhill, and the treasurer, Richard Casey. Shedden was the delegation's defence adviser and had discussions with Hankey about preparing Australia for war.

Secretary to the Department of Defence

In November 1937, aged 43, Shedden succeeded Malcolm Shepherd as the Defence department's fifth secretary. Since 1929 he had worked to expand the secretary's influence and authority. He had proven to be a skilful bureaucrat, not afraid to challenge the military chiefs, but usually working behind the scenes. Preparation for war dominated his first 20 months as secretary. He accelerated work on the War Book that set out procedures to be followed on the outbreak

of war. He was instrumental in the appointment of inspectors general for the Army and for defence works and supplies, and helped to arrange the visit of a senior British air force officer to inspect the Royal Australian Air Force. He encouraged more frequent meetings of the Defence Council, which included senior ministers, military chiefs, defence officials and industry representatives. Shedden was its secretary.

As Defence secretary, Shedden was an aloof and distant figure who 'eschewed publicity'. His whole life revolved around his work and he spent most of his time at the office. The Sheddens had no children and lived modestly. He was short (170 cm), always well dressed in suit and tie, and conscious of his status. Some military chiefs such as Major-General John Lavarack and Air Vice-Marshal Richard Williams resented his power. In 1936, Lavarack had clashed with the government over how to handle Colonel Henry Wynter, who had criticised the government's reliance on the Singapore strategy. The defence minister, Parkhill, had recommended that Lavarack be created a Companion of the Bath. Shedden, who had not yet been appointed secretary, was instrumental in having the recommendation withdrawn. The Navy chief, Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin, noted that Shedden 'always had the ear of the Prime Minister and could generally get the Chiefs of Staffs view and wishes overridden. Still ... he was an able and knowledgeable man and though one couldn't trust him personally his views were generally sound.'⁵ Of course, as Shedden supported the 'blue water' strategy, he was sympathetic to the Navy's views.

War Cabinet secretary

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 brought Shedden to the position of Australia's most important and influential public servant. As Defence secretary his role in bringing Australia to a war footing during the following months was crucial, but the prime source of his power and influence was his role as secretary of the War Cabinet – a post he held throughout the war. The prime minister, Robert Menzies, took over the Defence portfolio, now called Defence Coordination, and additional ministries were formed to administer the three services. Shedden became Menzies' principal adviser, while as War Cabinet secretary he ensured that War Cabinet decisions were promulgated and executed by the various government departments. In that sense, he was the key coordinator for the war effort. As secretary to the Defence Coordination Department he exercised a measure of control over other Defence-related departments. Indeed, he was at the heart of the strategic decision-making process, coordinating advice from the Service chiefs.

5 R. Colvin, *Memoirs* (Durley, Hampshire: Wintershill Publications, 1992), 119–20.

In many ways, Shedden invented the method of conducting Cabinet business. Before each meeting he prepared detailed cabinet agendum papers. He attended almost all the meetings of the War Cabinet, took notes of proceedings, prepared the minutes confirming the outcome of the discussions and then, as mentioned, from his position as secretary of the Department of Defence, set about ensuring that the decisions were implemented.

Shedden's orderly mind, unrivalled understanding of bureaucratic processes and knowledge of Defence administration resulted in a highly efficient secretariat, which gave increased authority to the work of the War Cabinet. Reflecting Shedden's insistence on accurate agenda and minutes of Cabinet submissions and decisions, and his highly efficient filing system, Menzies was once quoted as saying 'Documentation, thy name is Shedden'.⁶ During the war the need to house the extensive War Cabinet minutes resulted in establishment of the War Archives Committee. This led to appointment of an archives officer in the Commonwealth Library, and eventually to the Commonwealth Archives Office, now known as the National Archives of Australia.

While not always agreeing with Shedden's approach as secretary of his department, other senior defence public servants have praised him highly. Sir Frederick Chilton, who worked under Shedden for more than a decade and was later head of the Department of Repatriation, wrote that Shedden:

had a real presence and powerful personality. He was ruthless with those who crossed him, and devastating with those in his Department who could not rise to his exceptional standards of performance ... Shedden's 'forte' was top level policy and its broad application. He was not a good administrator in the sense of leadership of a team ... He ruled by fear – and this stultified initiative. But as a head of a small policy Dept of Defence, he was superb.⁷

Another senior defence public servant wrote: 'Shedden's brilliance as a Secretariat Co-ordinator and his tremendous capacity to maintain order in all work with which he was associated, more particularly in the chaos of war, was a very significant factor.'⁸

After the September 1940 federal election, in which Menzies retained office but was head of a minority government, he and the leader of the Opposition, John Curtin, agreed to establish the Advisory War Council in order to involve the Opposition in the crucial decisions affecting the nation's security. Shedden

6 J.P. Buckley, 'Sir Frederick Shedden, KCMG, OBE: Defence Strategist, Administrator and Public Servant', *Defence Force Journal*, 50 (January/February 1985), 27.

7 Letter, Sir Fredrick Chilton to author, 28 July 1979.

8 Transcript of lecture by Garry Armstrong, Australian Staff College, 8 May 1978.

became secretary of the Advisory War Council. Later, after the outbreak of war with Japan, by which time Curtin was prime minister, the Advisory War Council took on many of the functions of a War Cabinet.

In January 1941, Menzies departed for a visit to the Middle East and Britain in which he hoped to persuade the British Government to reinforce Malaya and Singapore. Shedden was his principal adviser throughout this journey. In the Middle East they visited Australian troops and discussed war developments with Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Blamey (GOC AIF) and senior British officers. In London, Menzies approved the decision to send forces to Greece. Shedden gained first-hand experience of how the British Government was conducting the war and was critical of British generalship in the Middle East.

After they returned to Australia, Menzies created five new ministries, and Shedden became secretary of the new Department of Home Security, while retaining his previous responsibilities. Also, Menzies agreed to allow a minute secretary to attend the War Cabinet meetings, thus relieving Shedden of this burden. The hand-written notes of the minute secretaries reveal that during the next four years Shedden played a significant role in War Cabinet discussions – he was not just a silent secretary.

Advising the Curtin Government

Conservative by nature, Shedden had been a long-time supporter of imperial defence, but when the Labor Government came to power in October 1941 he soon established himself as the prime adviser to John Curtin, prime minister and minister for defence. Shedden helped the new government in its transition to power and his influence was demonstrated after the outbreak of war with Japan. Following a War Cabinet meeting on 8 December 1941 he advised Curtin that the information presented by the Chiefs of Staff was ‘scrappy and meagre ... the Government must press it right home that this is a new war’.⁹

When the American general, Douglas MacArthur, became Commander-in-Chief of the Southwest Pacific Area in April 1942, Shedden assumed an even more important role. Curtin established the Prime Minister’s War Conference, which consisted of himself, MacArthur and any other minister he thought should be invited. The Prime Minister’s War Conference became the key decision-making body with regard to war strategy, exceeding even the War Cabinet. In practice, Shedden attended all meetings of the conference. As Curtin advised MacArthur, ‘if I should not be readily available, Mr Shedden has my full confidence in regard to all questions of War Policy’.¹⁰

⁹ Memo, Shedden to Curtin, 8 December 1941, NAA A5954, 555/10.

¹⁰ Letter, Curtin to MacArthur, 10 April 1942, NAA A5954, 1598/2.

In July 1942, MacArthur moved his headquarters to Brisbane and the Prime Minister's War Conference met less frequently. Instead, Shedden travelled to Brisbane on several occasions for discussions with MacArthur. In December Curtin told Shedden that, but for his assistance, 'he could not have carried on', and later said 'that he was his right hand and left hand and head too'.¹¹

In June 1943, Shedden was made a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George – the only civilian to be knighted by the Labor Government. He received a flood of congratulatory letters from politicians, military leaders, other government officials, academics and businessmen.¹² General Blamey, for example, wrote that the knighthood was 'fitting recognition of the grand services you have rendered during the last few years. All of us who know the background of Australia's effort utter a prayer of thanks for your guiding presence there'. Typically, Shedden assembled extracts of these letters and distributed them to various people such as S.M. Bruce and Vice-Admiral Richmond, and then sent copies of Richmond's laudatory reply to MacArthur. Professor Kenneth Bailey, Dean of Law at the University of Melbourne, might have admired Shedden for working 'anonymously and in silence, without publicity or boosting', but Shedden was making sure that those in influence knew what others thought.

In the second half of 1943 Shedden played an influential role in encouraging the War Cabinet to establish principles for reshaping the war effort. In fact, when the relevant departments failed to agree, Shedden and his staff drafted the paper that was approved by the War Cabinet. He then accompanied Curtin to Washington and London in April–May 1944 to seek Allied approval for these measures. On return he tried to ensure that manpower was redeployed from the Services to essential industries, but his attempts were hindered by Curtin's illness. Shedden provided valuable assistance to the acting prime minister, Ben Chifley, and continued this function when, following Curtin's death, Chifley became prime minister.

Post-war defence policy

During the war Shedden had argued that Australia's future defence policy should be based on three pillars: collective security through the United Nations; British Commonwealth cooperation; and local defence. The government approved these principles and, after the war, Shedden restructured the Defence Department in order to improve cooperation with Britain. Chifley and the defence minister, John Dedman, largely gave him a free hand. He accompanied Chifley to a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London in April–May 1946.

¹¹ Shedden's Diary, 25 February 1943, NAA A5954, 16/1.

¹² Extracts from the letters are in NAA A5954 654/7.

Shedden continued to gather more power and authority. Early in 1948 he was appointed chairman of the Defence Committee – the first non-serviceman to hold the position. The Navy chief, Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton, claimed that he engineered the appointment so that ‘that little bastard Shedden’ would be locked into the Committee’s decisions and would not undermine them.¹³ In fact, Shedden had already arranged his appointment long before Hamilton proposed it.

Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell, who succeeded Vernon Sturdee as Chief of the General Staff (CGS) in 1950, but had already been identified by Shedden as the next chief, was unwilling to criticise Shedden’s chairmanship too strongly. He recalled that Shedden was ‘a great Australian public servant’ with whom he had enjoyed the ‘happiest personal relationship’. Shedden:

had an unrivalled knowledge of matters associated with Commonwealth defence and he was a tireless and meticulous worker. If it could be said that he had a fault it was in his complete absorption in the work he was doing, leaving little time for outside activities. He had critics at home and abroad; in the main these were service people who could not match his intellect or who were jealous of his power and influence.

Rowell thought strategy was best left to those ‘who are trained in it, namely the Chiefs of Staff’, but saw Shedden as a special case; Australia was ‘not likely again to have someone of the calibre and background of Shedden to fill the post’.¹⁴ It has to be remembered that Shedden had saved Rowell’s career after the 1942 Kokoda campaign when Blamey had wanted to reduce him to the rank of colonel. Shedden played a role in having Rowell appointed Vice-CGS in January 1946 and recommended him as CGS in 1950. Rowell had good cause to remember Shedden favourably.

During 1948 and 1949, Shedden spent much time dealing with a leakage of information to the Soviet Union and the consequent reduction in the flow of classified information from the United States. He was instrumental in the formation of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) in March 1949, and later that year travelled to the United States and Britain in an effort to restore the flow of information. Initially he was unsuccessful and access to American information only began to be restored after the election of the Menzies Government in December 1949.

13 Letters, Hamilton to Foley, 16 August 1947, and Hamilton to First Sea Lord, 27 November 1947, Foley Papers (held by Rear Admiral James Goldrick).

14 S.F. Rowell, *Full Circle* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), 194–5.

The Menzies Government and the Cold War

Frustrated by the Chifley Government's reluctance to enter into full-scale defence planning with Britain, particularly concerning committing forces to the Middle East, Shedden welcomed the election of the Menzies Government. For several years he was in his element. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the government stepped up defence preparations and Shedden accompanied Menzies to a Prime Ministers' Conference in London in January 1951. On return Menzies claimed that the nation had only three years to prepare for war. Eventually, in December 1951, the Cabinet agreed to commit forces to the Middle East in time of war. During this period Shedden was closely involved in setting up the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), ensuring that it remained part of the Defence Department.

The strategic situation was changing. The threat of a world war declined and the government began to focus more on strategic planning in South East Asia. Also, the signing of the ANZUS Pact with the United States and New Zealand offered the prospect of increased cooperation with the United States. Shedden was closely involved in these aspects of defence planning, but his personal influence was waning. He and his department remained in Melbourne, while Menzies in Canberra sought advice from the senior ministers and the secretaries of his own department and External Affairs located there.

The decline of a mandarin

By 1954 Shedden had lost much of his previous influence and, during a visit abroad with Menzies in January and February 1955, was disappointed to find that he was upstaged by the External Affairs secretary, Arthur Tange. He had to fight off several attempts to remove him from his position as chairman of the Defence Committee. Menzies thought that the problem with Defence was 'the dead hand of Fred Shedden',¹⁵ and tried unsuccessfully to persuade Shedden to become ambassador to Japan or high commissioner to Canada. Tange later wrote disparagingly about Shedden:

Shedden was committed by past decisions and by his war-time experience with the War Cabinet, to Australia's engagement to Imperial (later Commonwealth) Defence. Led by Britain, this called for priority after the war to blocking Soviet expansion. Within these parameters Shedden was vigilant in protecting Australia's interests, such as control of Australian forces, from being submerged by British strategic priorities.

15 Vice Admiral Sir John Collins, interview with author, 9 October 1978.

When I came to deal with him I noted how much Shedden cultivated his personal access to figures prominent in the wartime Anglo-American alliance. I perceived no intellectual questioning by him – an industrious administrator, rigid in this, and defender of turf ...

During the years in which I had discussions with Shedden I did not hear any opinion on Australia's strategic outlook or priorities. In the Defence Committee he expected opinion to come up from subordinate committees comprised of uniformed officers. Shedden saw his role as chairman being to obtain a decision, giving either approval or disapproval without encouraging discussion of the substance – an attitude which I could do little to resist, as he had the support of the Chiefs.

Tange also criticised the Defence organisation and, by implication, Shedden's role in moulding it:

Defence seemed to value procedure and precedent over analysis and rethinking about a vastly changing world.

Defence personnel were a mixture (so it seemed to us in Canberra) of a handful of perceptive and questioning officers accompanying a larger number exercising the modest role of guiding Service officers in the unfamiliar terrain of public administration and accountability.

Shedden's system laid down the discipline that past opinion should be piled one upon the other before reaching a conclusion ... There was much turgid prose.¹⁶

Having read many of the Defence papers from this period I can confirm that the usual process was for the documents to work their way through all the previous decisions before arriving at their conclusion. While a struggle with the young, ambitious, capable and acerbic Tange was probably inevitable, Shedden's old friend, Richard Casey, who was once again a Cabinet minister, was also losing patience in him. In February 1953, Casey noted in his diary that he had discussed with Shedden 'the question of speed of decision on strategic questions in the Defence Department'.¹⁷ On 30 July 1954, after trying for some days to secure additional funds for defence, Casey wrote in his diary: 'The Chiefs of Staff have no opportunity to give their undiluted non-political professional advice as to what money is necessary for defence. All they have to say is filtered through Fred Shedden.'¹⁸

16 Sir Arthur Tange, 'Defence Memoir', draft manuscript.

17 Diary entry, 13 February 1953, p. 27, Casey Papers, NAA (Melb) M1153/0, 33.

18 T.B. Millar, ed., *Australian Foreign Minister: The Diaries of R. G. Casey, 1951–1960* (London: Collins, 1972), 173.

In July 1956 the government announced that Shedden would be stepping down as secretary in order to write a history of the development of Australian defence policy. He would continue on full pay until he reached retirement age in August 1958. He handed over to Edwin Hicks in October 1956, after serving 20 days less than 19 years as Defence secretary. But his retirement made little practical difference, as he continued his work for the next decade without obvious change in his routine. Each year he continued to advise Hicks when he was going on 'annual leave'.¹⁹ While researching my biography I had another insight into Shedden's mindset. In the University of Melbourne Archives I found several boxes of his papers that had not been included in the much greater number that were lodged in the Defence Department. In one of the boxes, which included the contents of Shedden's desk drawer, I found some small cardboard boxes, each with its own label – rubber bands, paper clips, pins, etc.

Shedden failed in the task of writing his history but not through lack of effort. He carried out research in the United States and Britain in 1958 and continued collecting documents, researching and writing. When he submitted the first volume (covering the period to 1939) to the publisher in October 1967 and running to a grand total of 426,431 words, he was advised that it was unpublishable; it was more a linking together of documents than a piece of historical writing. He kept working until May 1971 – two months before his death, by which time he had brought the story (over 2,400 typed pages) up to the end of the Second World War. It is preserved in the National Archives of Australia along with his official papers, which consist of over 2,400 boxes and are the most important documentary source on Australian defence policy from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s.

Shedden's failure to complete his book should not overshadow his outstanding achievements over a long working life. For 20 years he had dominated defence decision-making, giving it purpose and consistency. He had shaped a Defence organisation that persisted largely unaltered until the 1970s. He had played a principal part in the defence of Australia during the war. In the opinion of Sir Paul Hasluck, Shedden was 'one of the few outstanding men in the civil side of the Australian war effort. Discretion, orderly arrangement and careful groundwork were so large a part of his training and his method that his achievement was often hidden.'²⁰ Shedden devoted his life to the defence of Australia, and no other person has played, or is likely again to play, such an important part in the making of Australian defence policy for so a long period.

¹⁹ For example, memos Shedden to Hicks, NAA A5954, 63/4.

²⁰ P. Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1939–1941* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1952), 444.

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