



## Charles Lancial: Vichy Consul and French Patriot

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Although Charles Lancial is known to researchers in the field of French-Australian relations before and during World War II, his background, his role in Australia and his later career have not so far been explored in any depth. This study aims to fill that gap by using hitherto unknown information found in Australian Government archives and among the documents and personal recollections of the Lancial family.



In the desperate days following the fall of France in mid-1940, consular representatives of the new French State led by Philippe Pétain and based in Vichy largely accepted its dictates, proceeding to impose them on citizens across the French empire and beyond. In Australia, a majority of expatriate French men and women determined very early to reject the dispiriting ideology of capitulation promoted by Pétain, and chose instead to support the campaign for resistance led by Pétain's nemesis, Charles de Gaulle.<sup>1</sup> Australia's wartime French consuls, Jean Trémoulet and Charles Lancial, both Vichy men, conspired against local members of de Gaulle's Free French movement and succeeded in recruiting some of the waverers.

Trémoulet rates several mentions in the Australian Government's published selection of archival documents (Hudson and Stokes 1980),

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<sup>1</sup> Just under 50 percent of the French who were registered with their consulate actually became paid-up members of the Free French movement, but a much higher proportion unquestionably favoured the principle of resistance.





and a whole chapter in a book on Australia's allegedly 'most dangerous' men (Winter 2010, 79–88). Lancial, on the other hand, scores only one significant published source (Gorman 1997). Australian primary sources for the present study nevertheless abound. Government files in the National Archives of Australia include Lancial's secretly copied correspondence, formal communications between staff in key departments such as External Affairs, and notes on his every move by undercover operatives.<sup>2</sup> Lancial's letters to Australian newspapers, available through the Trove facility of the National Library of Australia, paint him as an argumentative individual bent on defending the Vichy position at all costs. Another primary source, the family history files gathered by descendants of his wife, show Lancial's much more agreeable side, as well as providing useful details of his life before and after World War II.<sup>3</sup> Only a small sample of the extensive secondary literature framing this cameo portrait of Lancial can be included here.

Although Jean Trémoulet and Charles Lancial shared Pétainist goals, they differed in important ways. Consul-General Trémoulet had attracted enmity throughout his term of office in Sydney, which began in 1937. Never personally popular with the French community and labelled, during the war, a national security risk by Canberra, he openly touted Nazi and Fascist tenets while placing his self-serving interests above those of France itself. In December 1940 the Australian Government asked Whitehall to withdraw Trémoulet's authority to act as consul-general (his *exequatur*), and by early March 1941 had engineered his departure from Australia (Barrett 2011).

Trémoulet's lower-ranked successor, Charles Lancial, moved from his position of consul in Melbourne to that of acting consul-general in Sydney after Trémoulet's demise. Lancial provoked less drama, but he stayed in Australia as the representative of Vichy much longer than

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<sup>2</sup> Typical of Australian Government archival coverage of the tensions between Gaullists and Vichyites among members of the French community, these documents record a mixture of well-informed analytically based decisions and random comment of dubious origin that sometimes clearly influenced such steps. Regrettably, French archives have had to remain unexplored.

<sup>3</sup> We are indebted to descendants of Lancial's wife, Inna Clapiers de Collongues—Charlotte Rumble and her brother, George Kerferd—for providing much interesting written information, comprising the recollections of both and a wide range of documents (hereafter, Lancial Family Archives), about their step-grandfather, Charles Lancial.





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did Trémoulet, which allowed him considerably more time in which to promulgate Pétainist doctrines among members of the French community. Certainly, like Trémoulet, he aroused government suspicion and courted public controversy, but he was a far more complex personality than his predecessor. He was thus capable of reconciling devotion to the Vichy cause with patriotism towards a vision of France that was well beyond the moral compass of a man like Trémoulet. Even so, the Pétainist vision of France that Lancial and those of his persuasion adopted became a miasma to others in the French community as clear indications of Vichy collaboration with Hitler emerged. And when Lancial attributed to Vichy alone the patriotic impulses that the Gaullists had displayed from the outset, he was not only shaping a *modus operandi* against them but also preparing the groundwork for his own ultimate disillusionment.

Not every French consul embraced the Pétainist administration wholeheartedly. In Mexico City, for example, the incumbent consul Albert Bodard tried to maintain a neutral stance that was unacceptable to the regime. He lost his post in December 1940. Bodard's successor, Gilbert Arvengas, told his masters at Vichy that he would not enter into any relationship with the Gaullists, but neither would he try to steer his compatriots towards Vichy by putting undue pressure on them. Arvengas too was removed from office (Rolland 1990, 363, 373, 388). Closer to home, in Australia's fellow dominion, New Zealand, the Vichy consul André Pouquet was not only pro-British but also well regarded personally. Thus, although in November 1942 the New Zealand Government had Pouquet's recognition as consul-general revoked, it had no objection to his staying in the country.<sup>4</sup> Lancial's differences from Bodard, Arvengas and Pouquet, as from Trémoulet, are a useful reminder that people sharing broad allegiances to a cause can hold observable shades of opinion.<sup>5</sup>

Born at Moulins, in central France, on 2 August 1893, Charles Emile Dominique Lancial passed his *baccalauréat* with distinctions in Latin,

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<sup>4</sup> NAA: A5954, 438/7, NZ prime minister, cablegram to Prime Minister's Department, Canberra, 18 November 1942; Pouquet left New Zealand only when the French Committee of National Liberation dismissed him in 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Such anomalies were apparent in France where, as Julian Jackson recounts in *France: The Dark Years 1940–44* (pp. 3–4), a member of the Resistance enthusiastically endorsed Pétain's National Revolution, a pro-British Vichyite criticised the capitulation to Germany, and two Resistance workers were strongly anti-Semitic.





Greek and Philosophy, though he did not proceed to university. He served his country in World War I as a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and was subsequently awarded the *Croix de Guerre 1914–1918*. Lancial had three living brothers, one of whom was also a career diplomat.<sup>6</sup> Prior to his Australian consular appointment, Lancial had spent fourteen years (from 1919) in the consulate of France at Newcastle upon Tyne, England; a short term in the French Legation at Riga, Latvia (first as vice-consul, then as secretary/archivist, and finally as second secretary); and just a few months in the German city of Leipzig. Family lore states that Lancial stayed so long in England and ‘unwisely refused new posts abroad’ because Inna Clapiers de Collongues, the woman he wished to marry, took some time deciding to divorce her former husband.<sup>7</sup> This man had been a Russian diplomat working in London when the revolution of 1917 erupted, and after moving from London to Paris he abandoned his wife and child. Although both Inna and her first husband were White Russians, his distant ancestry was French, a forebear having moved to Russia from Provence in 1712, hence the French name (Lancial Family Archives).

In November 1939, at the age of forty-six, Lancial became consul for France in Melbourne, bringing with him his wife Inna, who was a year or so younger than him, his twenty-five-year-old stepdaughter, Mariamna Clapiers de Collongues (also known as Marick), and a Finnish maid. Melbourne newspapers stated at the time of their arrival that Mariamna spoke perfect English (her French and German were also good), and that Mme Lancial was fluent in several languages. Lancial himself wrote many formal and informal letters in immaculate English, and his family remembers his excellent spoken English as being only slightly accented. A photograph of Inna as a young mother shows her to have been very attractive, and Lancial, six feet tall and always trim, was a good-looking man. Lancial and his family had fled Leipzig just before World War II broke out, abandoning all their possessions: furniture in Leipzig and money in Basle, Switzerland, where they briefly stayed on leaving Germany. The furniture, stored in Dresden, was destroyed when the city was bombed by the Allies in 1945 (Lancial Family Archives).

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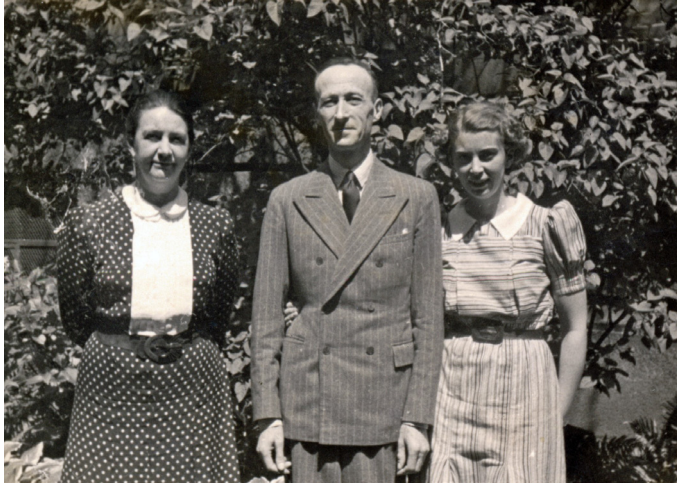
<sup>6</sup> The diplomatic posts held by Lancial’s brother Emmanuel included Capetown (1944–1949) and New Zealand (1950).

<sup>7</sup> The statement that Inna had been a widow before marrying Lancial (in 1937), repeatedly made in National Archives of Australia files and elsewhere, is incorrect.





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Charles Lancial with his wife Inna and stepdaughter Mariamna in Leipzig, 1939

It would be easy to assume that the man whom Australian archival documents depict as an unquestioning acolyte of Vichy would have upheld all its dictates, even its anti-Semitism and, eventually, its active role in Hitler's Final Solution. Whatever Lancial's attitude to other edicts of the regime, it is certain that he would have suffered personal anguish over the Jewish question. George Kerferd, the son of Lancial's stepdaughter Mariamna, has provided valuable evidence on this score:

I have never forgotten what my mother told me about the family's rushed departure from Leipzig just before the outbreak of war. For weeks the Consulate had been besieged by Jewish Germans desperately seeking the papers which would allow them to flee to France. They had already been stripped of everything, came in ever increasing numbers and towards the end were a heartbreaking sight as they were living and sleeping in the Consulate grounds. The very last thing Lancial did before leaving was to sign French authorisations for every single one of the applicants, who at that stage numbered nearly a hundred.<sup>8</sup>

While Lancial might not have been anti-Semitic, he was plainly not anti-German, but Kerferd testifies to his loathing of the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> This attitude

<sup>8</sup> George Kerferd, email to M. Barrett, 9 April 2016.

<sup>9</sup> George Kerferd, email to M. Barrett, 9 April 2016.





would probably have been dangerous for him to reveal to his superiors at the time, and the need for caution could account for his silence over other Vichy policies he might have questioned privately.

The truth of another piece of family lore supplied by Kerferd is substantiated by government records, though they situate it a little later: 'Particularly after moving to Sydney as Acting Consul-General in 1941, he became very distressed by the whole situation and wrestled long and hard with the idea of abandoning everything and seeking permanent asylum in Australia.'<sup>10</sup> Government files do not suggest personal struggles on Lancial's part in 1941, but his unhappiness from 1942 onwards and his request to remain in Australia late in the war are fully documented.

At the time of Lancial's move from Melbourne to Sydney, Australian foreign policy approximated the ambiguous position that Britain took for much of the war with regard to the French dichotomy: while Churchill's Government upheld de Gaulle's stance on French resistance, it officially recognised Pétain's Vichy administration. In practice, the Australian Government defended the Free French and paid less than lip service to Vichy. A notable incident in September 1940 showed the Government initially ambivalent, then decisive, when it allowed one of its naval vessels to participate in a Gaullist plan to convey a Free French loyalist, Henri Sautot, to New Caledonia. Sautot subsequently suppressed Vichy opposition in the French colony and became its governor (Lawrey 1982; Munholland 2005).

At the same time, Australian authorities faced contentious issues among their own French population. In a classic example of the challenges to diplomacy and public order that migrant groups warring among themselves can bring to administrations anywhere, divisiveness within its adult French expatriate population of seven or eight hundred greatly concerned the Australian Government (Gorman 1997). On the one hand, the Free French leader in Australia, André Brenac, was heavily lobbying the Government to help him persuade his mainly Gaullist compatriots to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the movement. On the other hand, Vichy's two consuls, though already on security watch lists, were demonstrably seeking to undermine their confidence in the Free French. Government attempts to control the situation meant that not only Trémoulet and Lancial but also Brenac came under the scrutiny of Australian intelligence staff.

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<sup>10</sup> George Kerferd, email to M. Barrett, 6 April 2016.



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A year or so after Lancial's arrival in Australia, Military Intelligence filed a report on him that criticised his manners and approach, claimed that he was disliked by the French community, and noted that he made no secret of his pro-Vichy views.<sup>11</sup> In fact Lancial flaunted his position, engaging in newspaper and private polemics with politicians and prominent Australians including the Gaullist academics A. R. Chisholm (Melbourne) and J. G. Cornell (Adelaide), ardent Francophiles though they were (Lancial Family Archives).<sup>12</sup> Another early opinion, from a 'most reliable' source, was kinder about Lancial's temperament but still critical: though he was a 'nice man personally', he was more dangerous because of it. In addition,

the man in question [ . . . ] goes out of his way to sabotage the Free French Movement wherever he can among the French community. He takes his marching orders no doubt from his chief in Sydney [Trémoulet], but he is a fanatical partisan; a Royalist who has not realised that French Royalism has been sabotaged and corrupted. [...] Holds that anything is better than a popular rising in France, and that even Hitlerism is better for Europe than any move towards the Left. Thinks that England let France down, and that the Oran incident [that is, Britain's deadly attack on French ships at Mers-el-Kébir in July 1940] is unpardonable.<sup>13</sup>

According to this portrait, Lancial belonged to the midstream of Vichy ideology: perhaps a disciple of Charles Maurras; politically right-wing but no Nazi; and one of many French citizens not unreasonably angered by British refusal to compromise at Mers-el-Kébir. If it is possible to credit Lancial with patriotic instincts, as is proposed here, he might have been expected to recognise a version of the same passionate response to the *patrie* shown by the Gaullists he proceeded to intimidate. But Lancial was probably just obeying instructions from Sydney when, as consul in Melbourne, he began to give French expatriates there good reason to mistrust him. In September 1940 the British Federation of the *Alliances Françaises* had asked the

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<sup>11</sup> NAA: A981, CONS 124 PART 1, Lieutenant-General E. K. Smart, GOC, Southern Command, report to Secretary, Military Board, 24 December 1940.

<sup>12</sup> These archives also include cuttings from Australian newspapers of twenty-nine anti-Vichy cartoons.

<sup>13</sup> NAA: A981, FRA 10 PART 1A, J. T. Fitzgerald, memorandum to the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, n.d. [1940]. (Minor typing errors have been corrected here.)



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Melbourne branch of the organisation to support the Allies and de Gaulle's Free French. Lancial took advantage of his position—he attended meetings assiduously—to delay the decision-making process for months.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the French living in Melbourne reported that their consul was visiting members of the community with the intention of deterring them from joining the Free French: the implication was that rejection of his urging could endanger family members in France.<sup>15</sup> Lancial had also armed himself with anti-Gaullist literature. The reports he quoted at every opportunity were designed to persuade listeners that de Gaulle's supporters in England consisted mainly of 'communists or dissident Frenchmen, who overwhelm[ed] Pétain with calumnies.' Pronouncements by de Gaulle himself—certainly a dissident Frenchman but no communist—did not appear among his documents.<sup>16</sup>

Lancial's security dossier lengthened in 1941 after he intervened in a series of dramatic events involving Trémoulet. Deprived of his consular authority but still in Sydney, Trémoulet had been arrested by military police on 22 February 1941 and kept overnight at the Holsworthy detention centre. On the next day he was moved to the Liverpool internment camp, where he remained until the following evening. In a letter to the Minister for External Affairs, Sir Frederick Stewart, Lancial called the arrest of his confrère 'an offence to France,' potentially damaging to future relations between the two countries.<sup>17</sup> While acquiescing to Lancial's demand that Trémoulet be released, Stewart defended the decision on the basis of 'broad national interests,' together with the Government's belief that the former consul-general was needlessly delaying his departure.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS12711, Box 3554 (1937–45), Minutes of Alliance Française de Victoria (1937–45), 19 September 1940, 26 February 1941. Lancial's cramped signature on the minutes testifies to his regular attendance.

<sup>15</sup> NAA: A981, CONS 124 PART 1, private report on the French Acting Consul General (Sydney), forwarded to the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 2 June 1941.

<sup>16</sup> NAA: A981, CONS 124 PART 1, private report on the French Acting Consul General (Sydney), forwarded to the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 2 June 1941.

<sup>17</sup> NAA: A981, FRA 10 PART 1A, Charles Lancial, letter to Sir Frederick Stewart, 24 February 1941.

<sup>18</sup> NAA: A981, CONS 127 PART 2, F. H. Stewart, letter to Charles Lancial, 27 February 1941.







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Further protests by Lancial proved fruitless, and in March 1941 he informed the Department of External Affairs that, following word from Vichy, and pending Trémoulet's embarkation, he was closing the Melbourne consulate and moving to Sydney, where he would conduct the business of both cities.

Two months later, in May 1941, Acting Consul-General Lancial attracted public criticism, including indignant letters from readers to newspaper editors and a flurry of hate mail, when he attempted to defend what the opponents of Vichy regarded as an indefensible gambit. At a meeting with Hitler that resulted in some minor concessions from the Germans, Vichy's Admiral François Darlan agreed to their use of airfields and military equipment in French-mandated Syria. The first German incursions into Syria infuriated the Allies, their responses to what they saw as Vichy collaborationism splashing inky headlines around the world. In Australia, the Melbourne *Argus* of 19 May 1941 published a long, hard-hitting editorial headed 'Taking off the kid gloves' and urging an end to the official tolerance of Vichy. The editorialist underlined the paper's endorsement of the Free French movement: 'Today the Free French under the Cross of Lorraine and the leadership of de Gaulle are the only body of men whom we can properly or advantageously recognise as representing France.'<sup>19</sup> Lancial re-entered the public debate the next day:

The French Government is abused for not opposing the landing of German aircraft, but what resistance could the French offer in Syria? [...] It is clear that in such conditions resistance by the French in Syria would only mean useless slaughter and devastation by the powerful German Air Force. [...] I have read with sorrow a manifesto issued by a certain section of Frenchmen in Australia [that is, the followers of de Gaulle]. What right have these Frenchmen, living in a sheltered land, to insult the leaders of their country for not ordering sacrifices which they themselves have no thought of sharing?<sup>20</sup>

The Hobart *Mercury* commented thus on the Gaullist manifesto:

The Central Committee of the Free French movement in Australia, in a manifesto today, condemned the Vichy Government of France and reaffirmed its devotion and faith in the cause of democracy. 'An illegal

<sup>19</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 May 1941, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 May 1941, p. 2.





government is threatening to cast eternal shame upon the people of France by co-operating with the enemy', the manifesto stated. 'Among the cowardly traitors of that Government, the most prominent is Admiral Darlan, the despicable valet of Hitler and the servile instrument of German barbarism. The real France is still gloriously represented at the side of the Allies on the battlefields by General de Gaulle and 50,000 men of the Free French Forces.'<sup>21</sup>

Not only were the Gaullists calling the regime Lancial served an 'illegal government', and condemning one of his heroes, Admiral Darlan, but they had had the temerity to lay claim to democracy and 'the real France' itself. For Lancial, the administration he served was his country's one and only legitimate authority.

A curt letter he immediately wrote to the Government about the *Argus* editorial of 19 May 1941 earned him a swift and widely publicised rebuke:

Consular representatives of the Vichy Government in Australia were warned by the Minister for External Affairs [...] to-night to exercise great caution in their utterances and activities. [...] Sir Frederick Stewart said that his reason for the warning was that the treacherous complicity of men of the Vichy Government with Germany had been so manifest.<sup>22</sup>

In response, Lancial wrote that he 'failed to understand the threat implied in the statement by Sir Frederick Stewart.' And he asked, 'am I expected to acquiesce in silence in [sic] insults poured on the Government I represent?'<sup>23</sup> This was the voice of a patriot, and it was not an unreasonable question.

Early in 1942 Lancial engaged in another public confrontation, this time scuffling in the *Sydney Morning Herald* with the fiercely opinionated former Prime Minister W. M. (Billy) Hughes, federal leader of the Opposition's United Australia Party. Hughes had stated that 'in this city friends of Vichy still move freely among us, ready to pass to the enemy any scrap of information which they can pick up'. Lancial called this a 'preposterous accusation',<sup>24</sup> but the nimble-footed Hughes quickly transferred the bulk of his criticism to Vichy collaboration with the Axis powers in France and Indochina.

<sup>21</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 19 May 1941, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 21 May 1941, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 22 May 1941, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 1942, p. 6





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At about the same time Lancial expressed frustration at restrictions over his activities following these and other clashes with authority. In a personal, handwritten letter to a woman called 'Marie Jo' he described his 'enforced idleness.' He said that he was 'desirous of again occupying an active and sure position' in his department, and that 'if the war should finish soon it would be very difficult, in my opinion, for me to again take up active work in view of events of the past'. It seems that Marie Jo was a woman of influence. He proceeded to ask her to explain his situation to a commandant (name undecipherable) if she should see him, 'or any other important person.' The letter demonstrates strong attachment to his profession and an understandable desire for a congenial future, but also a less than admirable willingness to pursue advancement in high places. Lancial also told Marie Jo something that his Free French opponents would have found laughable: that in the present circumstances he (and his wife?) had been able, 'without losing a single Australian friend', to 'explain the reasons for our fidelity to the Pétain Government, and our faith in our country. To say how one can be pro-Vichy without being anti-British.'<sup>25</sup>

By this time the Australian Government had decided that Lancial was indeed anti-British, though his claim to the contrary in such private correspondence is significant. Nevertheless suspicion fell directly on him when one of his censored letters to the Vichy French officials in Lisbon included Australian newspaper extracts that, though authentic, were placed in a sequence thought to provide 'the best available basis for enemy propaganda.'<sup>26</sup> The Department of External Affairs considered the evidence of suspicious activity so overwhelming that in March 1942 it recommended closure of the Consulate-General in Sydney. For reasons that almost certainly included bureaucratic inertia, nine months were to pass before this occurred, even though during that time undercover agents reported much burning of papers at the Consulate-General, and a marked reduction in its store of carefully wrapped archival documents.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile another matter began to occupy Lancial's time and attention. At the request of the Free Frenchman Henri Sautot, governor of New Caledonia,

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<sup>25</sup> NAA: C320, F15 PART 2, Charles Lancial, letter (copied and translated by a government official) to Marie Jo, 18 February 1942.

<sup>26</sup> NAA: C320, F15 PART 2, B. Tyrrell, OIC State Branch to Security Service, Canberra, 18 February 1942.

<sup>27</sup> NAA: C320, F15 PART 2, B. C. Taylor, report to Director-General of Security, 20 May 1942.





the Australian Government agreed to take over the custody of a number of Vichy French who had been interned in the colony.<sup>28</sup> Lancial's humanity mingled with his politics in the attempts he made to contact the eight men, who were taken to the Liverpool internment camp in May 1942. He unsuccessfully sought a writ of habeas corpus over the detainees, wrote numerous letters to the Australian Government defending them, and had his repeated attempts to interview them blocked. But the Government permitted Lancial to visit the men some weeks later, and he continued to work diligently on their behalf—even using some of his personal funds—throughout the fifteen months of their internment and the several months of their conditional release. Paradoxically, he found a powerful ally in the leader of the Australian arm of the Free French, his bitter foe André Brenac. Lyn Gorman, who has studied this episode in detail, wrote that their 'political and ideological differences did not prevent assistance to individual Frenchmen' (Gorman 1997). Nevertheless Brenac was conspicuous among those who for some time had been urging the Government to close the Consulate-General and remove Lancial from office.

Brenac's efforts did not go unnoticed. A report in October 1942 by W. B. Simpson, the Australian Director-General of Security, emphasised the problems that the mere existence of a Vichy consulate-general in Australia had created. In Canada, French consular offices had just been closed down because they now served little purpose and had become 'objects of suspicion', just as in Australia.<sup>29</sup> Surveillance over Sydney's vice-consul Pierre Clémentel, trade commissioner Jean Félix-Faure and his secretary, Michel Mornand, had indicated that they all held Pétainist views. Expenditure at the consulate was also attracting government attention. For example, Félix-Faure's salary and allowances totalled £3504 per annum at a time when trade between Vichy-controlled territories and Australia had ceased.<sup>30</sup> As for Lancial, wrote Simpson, although some of his comments could have been interpreted as anti-British, the most conspicuous feature of his attitude was 'to maintain the prestige of the French Nation, and his general conduct whilst providing embarrassment

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<sup>28</sup> NAA: A6445, 2/1942, exchanges of correspondence between the Department of External Affairs and Australia's representative in New Caledonia, B. C. Ballard.

<sup>29</sup> NAA: A981/4, NEW C4 PART 3, W. B. Simpson, letter to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 30 October 1942.

<sup>30</sup> NAA: A373, 8691, Director-General, Security Service, summary of file on Charles Lancial, 2 October 1942.



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could hardly be considered deliberately subversive.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless on 2 December 1942 Lancial learnt that the Australian Government had withdrawn his exequatur and the Consulate-General was about to close.



Charles Lancial in Sydney, 1943 or 1944

On the wider scene, while the Australian Government was pondering Lancial's fate, the Allies had carried out one of the most crucial manoeuvres of the war. Early in November 1942 Anglo-American forces invaded French North Africa, the dominant role of the United States prompting the Vichy Government to sever diplomatic relations with that country. Lancial was clearly unaware both of the complex nature of the new administration that President Roosevelt had created as a rebuff to de Gaulle, and of the intricate plots and sub-plots surrounding it (Crémieux-Brilhac 2000, 205–221, 231). He issued a statement to the press on 12 November, announcing that he was 'ready under the present conditions to serve in any capacity under the French authority that might be set up in North Africa.'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> NAA: A981/4, NEW C4 PART 3, W. B. Simpson, letter to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 30 October 1942.

<sup>32</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 November 1942, p. 7.





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Like many who were far better informed, he could never have foreseen de Gaulle's eventual supremacy in that 'French authority' when he wrote enthusiastically to the Australian Government on 30 November:

I march behind Admiral Darlan, General Giraud, General Noguès, Governor-General Châtel, Governor-General Boisson, those Frenchmen who, while maintaining their devotion to the person of Marshal Pétain, have brought to the cause of the Allies the French African Empire with its 30 million people.<sup>33</sup>

In France, a woman from Lyon recorded similar joy at the event: 'I want to shout out my happiness. I can't wait to get to the office tomorrow to share my giddiness with my colleagues' (Gildea 2015, 240). Another letter, written in France a few weeks later, expressed anger and resentment:

A government has established itself in Algeria under Darlan, taking decisions in the name of Vichy. Instead of bringing French people together this can only drive them apart. If the Americans want to use the Admiral for their war aims, so be it. But [...] we will not be humiliated by the Americans in this way, even for a moment (Gildea 2015, 240).

Geographically and often telegraphically distant from up-to-date political briefings—given Canberra's control over his communications—Lancial appears to have misread the situation at this point. When Australian authorities refused to allow him to inform Darlan of his willingness to represent French interests in Australia, they explained that the new organisation was the outcome of an arrangement made by the United States, and that since none of the Allies recognised it as a government, the question of representation was inappropriate.<sup>34</sup> Darlan was assassinated in December 1942, and General Giraud, another Vichy loyalist, took his place (Crémieux-Brilhac 2000, 215–217).

A letter Lancial wrote in English to an Australian friend in Melbourne on 30 December 1942 reveals a good deal about his emotional state at this time. While the published letters and hate mail he received in 1941 may

<sup>33</sup> NAA: A989, 1943/195/1/8/1/1, C. Lancial, letter to the Rt. Hon. Dr H. V. Evatt, 30 November 1942.

<sup>34</sup> NAA: A989, 1943/195/1/8/1/1, W. R. Hodgson, letter to C. Lancial Esq., 12 December 1942.



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have suggested that he was widely disliked, the missive addressed to Dr W. H. Fitchett shows that they were very close friends. Lancial began: 'Your letter has deeply touched me and was for me a comfort, not only because of your personal sympathy, but also because I feel in it your friendship for my country'. Lancial had obviously already told Fitchett about losing his consular position, for he now acknowledged that Australia had 'a right of sovereignty' in its decision against which he should not protest.<sup>35</sup>

In the following weeks, despite the official closure of the Consulate-General, intelligence operatives believed it was surreptitiously continuing to function, with Lancial still spending time in the supposedly abandoned office. In March 1943 he learnt that his former staff (that is, Clémentel, Félix-Faure and Mornand) were to go to Algiers, while he himself was to await further orders.<sup>36</sup>

On 8 May 1943 Tunisia fell to the Allies, and a fortnight later Lancial prepared a congratulatory telegram to send to General Giraud. As translated by censorship authorities, it read:

We salute with profound admiration the glorious participation of the troops under your command in the liberation of Tunisia. We assure you of our entire confidence to bring to a successful conclusion the fight for the deliverance of our country. We are at your entire disposition to aid you to the utmost of our power.<sup>37</sup>

Lancial's telegram included the signatures of forty-five French men and women (including consulate staff) whose views presumably coincided with his own. Most of them had already been on Australian intelligence lists, as suspected Pétainists, for a couple of years. By comparison with the several hundred members of the French community who, in spite of attempted

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<sup>35</sup> NAA: A373, 8691, Charles Lancial, letter to W. H. Fitchett, 30 December 1942. Fitchett was almost certainly a son of the prominent Melbourne Methodist minister and educator W. H. Fitchett, noted for his best-selling book *Deeds That Won the Empire* (1897). Dr Fitchett's wife Elsie was also a good friend. In a letter written just before Lancial's departure from Australia in 1944, she referred to his 'troubled time' in Australia and paid tribute to him as 'a patriot and a gentleman of France'.

<sup>36</sup> NAA: A989, 1943/195/1/8/1/1, cablegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, to Prime Minister's Department, Canberra, 4 March 1943.

<sup>37</sup> NAA: A989, 1943/195/1/8/1/1, telegram (translated) from Lancial to General Giraud, Algiers, n.d., but referred to External Affairs on 27 May 1943.





## Charles Lancial: Vichy Consul and French Patriot

intimidation by their consuls, had joined de Gaulle's Free French movement, they were a very small minority.

De Gaulle established the French Committee of National Liberation in June 1943, and by August had outwitted both General Giraud and President Roosevelt. At this point the Australian Government informed Whitehall that it would not allow Lancial to represent the new regime in Australia, and that it wished appointments for him and his colleagues to be discouraged at the highest level. Such appointments would 'cause trouble in the French community here, and embarrass the present delegation in Australia of Fighting France [de Gaulle's new name for the Free French movement], who have on [the] whole done a good job'.<sup>38</sup> On 7 September 1943, following an initiative by the British Government, Canberra issued a statement officially recognising de Gaulle's new administration. Within a week Lancial's colleagues Clémentel and Félix-Faure (but not Félix-Faure's secretary, it seems) were on their way to Algiers via the United States. Lancial himself, in view of what he described as 'the development of political events in North Africa' (clearly inimical to his preconceptions), had changed his mind about wanting to leave and therefore now requested permission to stay in Australia.<sup>39</sup>

While he spent much of 1943 arguing with the Australian Government about the right to communicate directly with Giraud, and requesting that the families of departing consular staff be allowed to stay in Sydney, Lancial also went to some trouble to ensure that French pensioners formerly under consulate care did not lose their incomes. As the French Benevolent Society, which had looked after the worst-off for some months, was now running out of money, he asked the Government to allow funds from Algiers to be transferred to Australia. He emphasised the unofficial nature of his intervention, and his non-involvement in the handling of the money. The authorities agreed to the request, though they remained justifiably suspicious of Lancial: for example, as late as November 1943, a Security Service report showed that the Consulate-General was still open for business, with Lancial apparently continuing to disobey his instructions from Canberra.

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<sup>38</sup> NAA: A989, 1943/195/1/8/1/1, Prime Minister's Department, cablegram to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, London, 25 August 1943.

<sup>39</sup> NAA: A373, 8691, W. R. Hodgson, memorandum to Director-General of Security, 1 February 1944.





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Whatever else Lancial was doing, innocent or otherwise, arrangements for the safekeeping of consulate documents after his departure claimed much of his attention in late 1943 and early 1944. The Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the French Committee of National Liberation had ordered him to hand over the archives to his adversary André Brenac—something he refused to do even though he was assured that the files would remain sealed. In January 1944 Lancial explained his awkward position to the head of the Department of External Affairs, W. R. Hodgson, and asked to be allowed to remain in Australia as a private citizen. He concluded:

I desire to add that I should be insincere if I was to pretend that that question of the archives is the only point of difference I have with the Committee of Liberation. Like many Frenchmen, I had, for the good of my country, wished and hoped for another kind of union than that which has developed and is practised in Algiers. My discouragement is great.<sup>40</sup>

Hodgson avoided direct comment on the archives matter, and Lancial was obliged, in the end, to leave the consulate papers in the hands of André Brenac. Hodgson also refused to arbitrate on Lancial's request to remain in Australia. That decision, he wrote, was for Lancial and the Committee of National Liberation to make, but the Australian Government 'would certainly not be party to any action opposed to the Committee's wishes in this regard'.<sup>41</sup> By this time, February 1944, the Committee's wishes had become orders: Lancial was to proceed to Algiers without delay. A couple of weeks later he applied for an exit permit to leave Australia for the United States, and thence to Algiers. His ship, the SS *Cape San Antonio*, sailed in June for San Francisco.<sup>42</sup> From there Lancial travelled to New York, and after months at sea arrived in Algiers. In October 1944 de Gaulle's Provisional Government of the French Republic instructed him to proceed to Paris (Lancial Family Archives).

In the meantime the Australian Government had agreed to Lancial's request for his wife to remain in Sydney for the time being, and soon after he reached Algiers his stepdaughter Mariamna married her Australian

<sup>40</sup> NAA: A373, 8691, C. Lancial, letter to Colonel Hodgson, Department of External Affairs, 24 January 1944.

<sup>41</sup> NAA: A373, 8691, W. R. Hodgson, letter to C. Lancial, Esq., 1 February 1944.

<sup>42</sup> United States Department of Justice, 'List or manifest of alien passengers' due to sail on 14 June 1944.





fiancé, George Briscoe Kerferd.<sup>43</sup> Lancial was destined never to return to Sydney, and the fate of the Sydney consulate-general archives, left with André Brenac, was still unknown in 2016. Nor did he revisit Melbourne, but before departing for the United States he made careful arrangements for the storage of the Melbourne consulate's archives and furniture, informing the Melbourne firm F. W. Prell & Co. that it would have to apply to Brenac for the rent in future. These archives, long assumed to have been lost, were rediscovered in 1988 (Nettelbeck 1988).

While the numerous files mentioning Lancial in the National Archives of Australia invariably depict him as a passionate devotee of Vichy, there is no suggestion that his narrowly focused patriotism ever strayed into blind nationalism. But it seems that he did not condemn the disloyal attitudes of Trémoulet, the consul he succeeded in Sydney, nor publicly criticise Vichy policy. Lancial's disillusionment late in the war is well documented, however. It seems that its principal cause was his inability to recognise a level of patriotism, comparable with his own, in the Free French supporters against whom he had plotted. He could not see that it was possible for both sides, not just one, to legitimately claim loyalty to 'the real France'.

Government files are not invariably critical of Lancial. Intelligence staff noted the humanity he demonstrated towards New Caledonian detainees and French pensioners, while they had roundly condemned the behaviour of Jean Trémoulet. Moreover, the lack of evidence in Australian Government documents does not mean that Lancial agreed with all the policies of Vichy. His family's account of the risks he took on behalf of destitute Jews in 1939, and his privately expressed detestation of the Nazi party, suggest that he is likely to have had secret misgivings about at least some of them.

Lancial clearly worried about how de Gaulle's French Committee of National Liberation would greet him in Algiers, and Australian sources have yielded no information on this or later eventualities. The descendants of his wife, Inna, have filled many of the gaps, however. George Kerferd, his step-grandson, makes it clear that, in spite of Lancial's forebodings over his possible fate in Algiers, he was well received there. More significantly still, on 25 March 1949, he was awarded the *Légion d'honneur*—something

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<sup>43</sup> Kerferd was an academic and grandson of the nineteenth-century Melbourne politician (briefly premier) and judge George Briscoe Kerferd. The full family name has been passed down to the present George Kerferd.



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that Kerferd believes ‘would have been unthinkable if the post-war French authorities thought he was in any way tainted by the Vichy period.’<sup>44</sup> Certainly, many of his consular colleagues in the Vichy camp would have perished in the *épuration* that followed the war.

The consular career he had feared might be over rapidly resumed: in Genoa, Italy, from 1945 to 1951; in Koblenz, Germany, from 1951 to 1958, then, also in 1958, in Baden-Baden. On retiring formally in 1958 at the age of 65, Lancial moved with his wife to Ventimiglia, Italy, near the French border, where he acted as consular agent until 1970. During his time in Ventimiglia his stepdaughter Mariamna, and her children, George and Charlotte, frequently visited him. After Inna’s death in 1960 Lancial married his German housekeeper, and later moved with her to the German village of Kempenich in order to be closer to her relatives (Lancial Family Archives).

Australian authorities recorded frequent instances of acerbity in Lancial’s media duels, and it is easy to discern the anger he barely concealed under a diplomatic veneer in some of his official correspondence. For George Kerferd, Mariamna’s son, he was ‘always the nicest and kindest of men.’<sup>45</sup> Mariamna’s daughter, Charlotte Rumble, remembers his generosity: the marvellous Italian dolls he gave her, as well as an early introduction to French and German that helped form her career as a language teacher. In 2016 Charlotte wrote:

My mother always said that had I been a boy she would have called me Charles after her stepfather, thus I ended up as Charlotte, a name I treasure because of him as well as having Inna as my middle name after his first wife.<sup>46</sup>

The French patriot who represented his beloved country throughout a long working life did not return to it in the end. He died in 1978 and is buried in the German village that was his final home.

Sydney

<sup>44</sup> George Kerferd, email to M. Barrett, 9 April 2016.

<sup>45</sup> George Kerferd, email to M. Barrett, 6 April 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Rumble (née Kerferd), email to M. Barrett, 19 March 2016.





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