AUSTRALIAN BRASS

It is doubtful whether there was another leader in the Australian Army with greater devotion to his job of training and commanding soldiers, or with more military learning or a more complete and carefully worked out doctrine of war.

Gavin Long, official historian of Australia
in the war of 1939-45 (1943)

AUSTRALIAN BRASS

THE CAREER OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR HORACE ROBERTSON

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The Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson was asked once whether he enjoyed writing; he said no, but that he enjoyed having written. After five years of living with Red Robbie I might endorse the sentiment. But if writing can be a painful process at times, among a working historian's greatest pleasures is the contact which research brings with all manner of people whose assistance is given so readily. I hope the final product will help to repay the debts I owe them.

Professor Peter Dennis, Alec Hill and my father, Major General R. A. Grey, read the manuscript in its entirety and offered many useful criticisms and corrections. Their different perspectives have greatly strengthened the finished book. Dr Robin Prior was his usual fund of insights into the conduct of the First World War. Dr Peter Edwards and Associate Professor Eric Andrews offered valuable criticisms of early chapters, while Dr Stewart Lone provided some Japanese perspectives on the occupation. All have my thanks; none are responsible for such errors and inconsistencies as remain.

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The late Brigadier Tony Hammett had been gathering material in the hope some day of writing something on Robertson; when he heard that I had decided to tackle a full biography he immediately placed this material at my disposal and provided a number of helpful introductions to others who had known my subject. Such selflessness was entirely typical, and his tragic early death in an air crash was a deep personal loss to all who knew and admired him. Scarcely less generous has been the contribution of the late Major General R. N. L. Hopkins. In numerous letters and in a long interview in Adelaide in May 1987, he shared with me his personal knowledge of Robertson acquired through many years of friendship and service together going back to Egypt at the end of the First World War. He long believed that Robbie deserved some greater measure of public recognition, and I hope that this book would have met his expectations. The younger generation of Robertson's family, his siblings' children, helped at an early stage by talking to me about their uncle and, in the case of Mrs R. G. O'Shea and J. H. G. Stevenson of Melbourne, allowed me to take away and copy such photographs and personal papers as they still possessed. I am grateful to them and to Bruce Robertson of Sydney and Mrs Nanette Clutterbuck of Perth accordingly.

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My greatest debt, as always, is to my wife, Gina, and daughter, Victoria, who is still young enough not to begrudge her father his eccentric pursuits.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

Illustrations

Unless otherwise stated all photographs are from the Robertson papers and appear by courtesy of Mrs R. G. O'Shea of Melbourne.

Maps

ABBREVIATIONS

AAMWS	Australian Army Medical Women's Service
AA&QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General
ABDACOM	American British Dutch Australian Command
ACJ	Allied Council for Japan
ADC	Aide de Camp
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
AG	Adjutant General
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ALH	Australian Light Horse
AMF	Australian Military Forces
AWAS	Australian Women's Army Service
Bde	Brigade
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BCAIR	British Commonwealth Air Force [Japan]
BCOF	British Commonwealth Occupation Force [Japan]
BCFK	British Commonwealth Forces, Korea
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff
BRINDIV	British Indian Division
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CG	Commanding General [US Army]
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CMF	Citizen Military Forces
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery
CRE	Commander, Royal Engineers

DAQMG	Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General
DDMS	Deputy Director Medical Services
Div	Division
DMA	Director of Military Art
DMF	Darwin Mobile Force
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
EEF	Egyptian Expeditionary Force
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GSO	General Staff Officer
HQ	Headquarters
IDC	Imperial Defence College
JAPC	Joint Administrative Planning Committee
JCOSA	Joint Chiefs of Staff in Australia
MD	Military District
MG	Machine Gun
NAWU	North Australia Workers' Union
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
NZMR	New Zealand Mounted Rifles
OC	Officer Commanding
PMF	Permanent Military Forces
RAA	Royal Australian Artillery
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAE	Royal Australian Engineers
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RAR	Royal Australian Regiment
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RMC	Royal Military College
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
ROK	Republic of [South] Korea
SAA	Small Arms Ammunition
SCAP	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers
UKCOS	United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff
UKLIM	United Kingdom Liaison Mission [Japan]
UKSLS	United Kingdom Services Liaison Staff [Canberra]

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The changing nature and composition of the Australian army between Federation and the 1960s is one of the concerns of this book. A brief explanation of its component parts and their relationship to each other will assist the reader to follow the organisational changes discussed.

Since 1901 the army has consisted of the following components:

The Citizen Military Forces (CMF), often referred to as the militia, was raised at different times by voluntary enlistment or compulsory service on a part-time basis. It has never served as such outside Australian territorial limits. This is the forerunner of the current Army Reserve.

The Permanent Military Forces (PMF), the pre-Second World War regular army, was intended primarily to staff, train and administer the CMF. Before 1939 it had a number of constituent corps, of which the most important for our purposes were the Australian Staff Corps, the Administrative and Instructional Staff (A & I Staff), and the Australian Instructional Corps (AIC), although it included as well small artillery, ordnance, engineer and medical units. The Staff Corps was formed on 1 October 1920, and from that date all officers of the combatant permanent forces, and not just graduates of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, were assigned to it. The A & I Staff, which had fulfilled the administrative and instructional function in the pre-1914 army, was disbanded, and on 14 October 1921 was succeeded by the AIC, which incorporated the majority of permanent non-commissioned officers.

The Australian Imperial Force (AIF), was raised in 1914 and 1939 (the 2nd AIF) on an all-volunteer basis to serve anywhere outside Australia for the duration of hostilities.

The Australian Military Forces (AMF), was the pre-1947 name for the army as a whole. In the Second World War the AMF comprised the CMF, the AIF, and the PMF.

The postwar PMF was reinstituted on 1 August 1947, and on 30 September 1947 became the Australian Regular Army (ARA). It consisted

of all members of the prewar PMF still serving, and its membership overlapped the Interim Army.

The Interim Army, formed on 1 October 1945, consisted of all members still serving on full-time duty. It carried on where the 2nd AIF left off until a permanent peacetime army was reconstituted. It was disbanded on 14 August 1952, and its members transferred into the Australian Regular Army (ARA) or the Regular Army Supplementary Reserve (RASR).

The Australian Regular Army (ARA) was formed on 30 September 1947 from the postwar PMF. This is the current full-time volunteer force.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Regular Army possesses a relatively short history, although it has spent a considerable part of it at war. Until 1945, however, the major influence on Australian military policy was not the regular army but the Citizen Military Forces: part-time, amateur soldiers whose main interest, and means of earning a living, lay elsewhere than in the military profession. The struggle of the regular officer corps to assert their role as the principal source of military advice to government was protracted and lasted until after the Second World War. As elsewhere, in Canada and the United States for example, it was ultimately successful not least because of the reputation which regular officers earned in two world wars, but also because the increasing complexity of modern industrial warfare made it essential that those who were charged with the defence of the nation should devote themselves full-time to the task. Involved here too was the parallel development of ideas about the importance of professionalism, not only in the military but in many civilian spheres as well. At the end of the twentieth century the form which Australian defence policy has taken is a legacy of the gradual ascendancy of the regulars in the first fifty years after Federation.

If it now seems to have a certain inevitability about it, this was not readily apparent to the generation of Australians who soldiered through the interwar years. Australians have long possessed a peculiar conceit about their prowess as 'natural' soldiers and redoubtable fighters and, for many in government, the experience of the First World War seemed to confirm an idea which had its genesis in the Boer War at the century's turn. Regulars existed to train and administer, but not to command, the citizen soldiers who formed the nation's first line of continental defence. Imbued with this notion, and driven by that desire to economise in matters of national defence which is the most consistent thread in twentieth-century Australian defence policy-making, successive governments presided over the running-down of an army which, whatever claims are made for its contribution to victory in Europe in 1918, was

by 1939 less effective militarily than the old Australian Imperial Force of whose traditions it was allegedly the guardian and inheritor.

War is an exacting school, never more so than in a century littered with individual and national reputations for military effectiveness. Whatever claims might be made for it in the cheery home-front propaganda, in the Second World War the Australian army, volunteer and conscript alike, evolved many of the characteristics of a long-term, regular force in the course of six years of war; this evolution could not have been accomplished without the stiffening of professional soldiers who helped instil in both the AIF and the militia the sense and standards of military professionalism which stood them in such good stead against the Italians, Germans, French and Japanese. The changes in the international order in consequence of the war, coupled in Australia with a tentative endorsement of the recommendations of the Squires report in 1939, led to the creation of a small regular army after 1945. This placed the professional military in charge of the military profession, and enabled Australia to fight a succession of small and medium wars in the thirty years thereafter without resort to the raising of expeditionary forces or mass armies.

Lieutenant General Sir Horace Robertson, as he eventually became, was a central figure in the maturation of the army which he joined as a staff cadet in 1912. His military career spanned more than forty years and two world wars, as well as a lengthy period as the Commander-in-Chief of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan from 1946, and non-operational commander of Commonwealth forces in Korea in 1950 and 1951. When he joined the army, the Royal Military College, Duntroon was two years from graduating its first classes and the staff cadets who were intended to provide the leavening of staff officers to the Australian forces numbered just forty-one. By the time he retired in 1954, a second Duntroon graduate had been appointed successively to the post of Chief of the General Staff as professional head of the army, in a succession which has remained unbroken subsequently, and Staff Corps officers held all the positions on the Military Board save only that of Citizen Military Forces Member. In the decade after his death in 1960, the Australian army would field a force in Vietnam which would be officered entirely by regulars, or by national servicemen commissioned for the duration of their obligation. With the exception of a handful of CMF officers recalled to full-time duty for short periods, there were no citizen soldiers in the units of the 1st Australian Task Force. Robertson's career thus provides an excellent vehicle with which to chart the development of the regular army in this period.

Professional historians, especially academic ones, from time to time object that biography is not the proper province of historians. Some of the most eminent, Namier and Elton among them, have asserted that

biography is a second-rate calling followed by those who lack the creative imagination to work outside the boundaries provided by a single life. To the counter that a 'life and times' approach overcame these objections, Elton responded that even if a person's death marked the end of an epoch — and this was rarely the case — their birth did not, and the formative years of a subject are no fit concern for an historian of an age which was unaware of them.[1] And no individual dominates an age to that extent. 'Very occasionally a "great man's" life may prove a tool useful for opening a problem of history . . . but even when the tool is useful it is not the best available.' Concentration on a single individual therefore involves the biographer in the distortion of the times which the subject inhabited.

The fact that so many professional historians ignore these injunctions in the pursuit of biography should not blind us to their validity. The pursuit of a subject, like the writing of history more generally, is dependent on the availability of evidence and the lack of that evidence often leads biographers into trivialising either their subject or their times in pursuit of trendy psychological theorising which has little to do with either. As Robert Skidelsky has commented, Freud led the modern biographer to see 'not what was, but the cause of what was. The biographer no longer portrayed life, he explained it . . . The real action took place in the unconscious; or if you were a Marxist, in the class struggle'.[2]

It is not necessary to adopt Skidelsky's view that the real function of biography is 'to hold up lives as examples', although this may indeed form part of its purpose, in order to agree that much modern biography has had little to do with the lives of its subjects. The French historian Jacques Le Goff has noted the recent revival of biography in academic writing while lamenting that it so frequently follows a 'traditional' form; 'superficial and anecdotal, boringly chronological, indulging in an out-of-date psychologising and incapable of revealing the general historical significance of a particular life'.[3] He enjoins us to remember that in the first place a biography is the life of an individual, and that the aim must be 'of presenting and explaining one person's life within history'.

Despite some appearances to the contrary, biographies of generals are not a strong suit in Australian historical writing, and good modern ones are even more scarce. While Geoffrey Serle's magisterial work on Monash dominates the landscape,[4] its very existence points up the problem; there is no really adequate biography of Australia's most senior soldier, Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, and the majority of Monash's own subordinates in the First World War, and Blamey's in the second, lack any form of treatment at all. The same can be said for the years of intense military activity since 1945, which are a desert of critical studies of Australia's leading servicemen. In recent years there has been a tendency to substitute studies of command for full biographical treatment; while these have often gone some way towards an analysis of the central

professional concerns of their subjects' lives, they have in general been short and episodic in their treatment and thus are no substitute for full scholarly treatments of the sort which Serle, Hill, Pedersen and Lodge have produced.[5]

Having said this, I must admit that this book is much more a professional study of a senior officer than a full interior life of the man. The reasons are readily explicable; the lack of a body of private papers precludes the reconstruction of Robertson's emotional life, thoughts and feelings to anything like the degree which Serle was able to achieve through the vast corpus of the Monash papers. It is a curious thing that most Australian generals do not write much for publication, nor even privately for their own amusement, and this leads as well to a disinclination to keep diaries, letters and the other minutiae of daily life which would enable military biographers to recapture their subjects in all their dimensions. But to this must be added a particular problem, namely the dispersal of such papers as Robertson had gathered at the time of his death, the existence of which is known with certainty and the fate of which can only be surmised.

While this may be regarded as a disadvantage, it nonetheless carries with it something of virtue, for as a result I have had to trawl through the collections of many public and private figures in the search for glimpses and reflections of a man about whom few of his professional contemporaries held neutral views. I have also avoided the temptation, I hope, to write an 'authorised life', reconstructing the memoirs the subject might have written himself if he had spared the time to do so. But it has meant that this book is in large part a study of the rise to prominence of one of the Australian army's more controversial and colourful senior officers at a time of great change in his nation's history. Boswell believed that 'nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eaten and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him'. I cannot claim to have done so, but I do not believe that my treatment of his military life and public career suffers much for all that. Treatment of his personal life, and in particular of his marriage, is necessarily much less complete. I have commented on the latter in places, but have avoided the temptation to either speculation or gossip.

This book then attempts to do three things. It seeks to return a little of the considerable public recognition which he enjoyed in his lifetime to a man who rendered distinguished service to his country and to the army in arduous times. To that extent the book meets the justification which Skidelsky advanced for biography. Second, it presents the first detailed account of the Commonwealth occupation of Japan at the command level, from its inception at the end of the Pacific war until Robertson's eventual return to Australia less than a year before the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco which brought formal occupation to an end in

1952. This is an incident in Australia's vitally important modern relationship with Japan which is too little known and even less understood. Finally, it examines the development of the regular officer corps through the experiences and career of one of its members, and in so doing I hope meets the need to set a subject in history as Le Goff enjoins us to do. But above all it remains the story of a distinguished Australian, and of a remarkable life.