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978-1-107-04365-7 - The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard

John C. Blaxland

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS OF AUSTRALIA'S ARMY

The Aussie diggers of today's Australian Army draw on the inspiration of their predecessors. Australian soldiers have fought at the direction of their government in many places ranging from South Africa from 1899 to 1902 (during the Anglo-Boer War), to Gallipoli in 1915 and Beersheba in 1917 (during the First World War), to Tobruk in 1941 and Kokoda in 1942 (during the Second World War). After the world wars, Australian soldiers also fought at such places as Kapyong in Korea in 1951 and Long Tan in Vietnam in 1966. Increasingly, they also have drawn inspiration from the large number of lesser-known military operations conducted between the time when Gough Whitlam took office and John Howard lost office as Prime Minister of Australia. Yet there is little available to read that encapsulates this more recent experience. Those operations are the primary subject of this book.

In the aftermath of the politically contentious Vietnam War, Australian governments looked to be more circumspect in their use of armed force abroad. Rather than going 'all the way' with the United States, successive Australian governments thought more cautiously about the national interest and how a military force might contribute.¹ These were years, therefore, of niche contributions to operations often far afield in support of allies and international organisations including the United States, the British Commonwealth and the United Nations. Such contributions were carefully calibrated to generate the desired effect without exposing Australia to the kind of social division experienced at the height of the Vietnam War. But to understand the Australian Army in the years from

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Whitlam to Howard, one must have a sense of how the use of Australian land forces evolved in the twentieth century.

THE WORLD WARS

Before the First World War, Australia relied largely on the Royal Navy for its strategic defence, with a relatively inexpensive militia army as a local backup. During the First World War and beyond, the military force that came to be known as the Australian Army expanded massively, building on the traditions and military procedures it inherited from the British Army to establish its own proud record of success on operations. For such major wars Australia has usually relied on relatively large and primarily infantry-centric forces as the basic component of its contribution to allied war efforts. For most wars, Australian land forces consisted primarily of infantry; albeit with some supporting artillery, and detachments of other components such as armour, logistics, medical, intelligence, engineering and aviation. The ability to muster and deploy such supporting capabilities is required by self-supporting, first-order armed forces.² Australia has struggled to develop and maintain this level of capability, often relying on Britain or the United States to provide it instead.

The fixation on Gallipoli in Australian popular culture has overshadowed Australia's premier wartime field commander, Lieutenant General (later General) Sir John Monash. Under his command, the Australian Corps in France was instrumental, alongside the Canadian Corps of Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie, in some of the greatest feats of arms seen in the First World War.³

The Australian approach to conducting military operations also was influenced by the experiences of desert warfare in the Middle East during both world wars, where extensive battlefield manoeuvre was both feasible and more common.⁴ Lieutenant General (later General) Sir Harry Chauvel's exploits with the Desert Mounted Corps in Egypt and Palestine in 1917 and 1918 were influential. In contrast to the experience of trench warfare in Europe, the legacy of this experience was of a fluid and not just positional form of warfare. The same could be said of the exploits of the Australians who fought over similar terrain a generation later.⁵

The social dissension generated over the conscription referendums in 1916 and 1917 is particularly noteworthy. Australians were prepared to send volunteer forces abroad, even in the face of casualties numbering in the tens of thousands. But repeated attempts to introduce compulsory military service overseas foundered on public opinion. The dissension

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generated had muted echoes in the Second World War, although these subsided when the threat was closer to Australia, more serious and more imminent. The immediacy of the threat, particularly following the fall of Singapore in 1942, left Australians (in the main) prepared to send conscripts to fight wars offshore – if only in Australia's immediate neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, the Australian experience in the Second World War also featured fighting in the jungles and islands to the north of Australia. There, amphibious operations, light forces, limited availability of artillery (with a concomitant increased reliance on air support) and small-team actions, including assertive patrolling, featured prominently. Tanks also proved to be remarkably effective in this environment when operating dispersed and directly in support of advancing infantry – much as they had been used a generation earlier under General Monash in France. At the war's height, the Australian Army learnt to master combined-arms warfare in the New Guinea campaign from 1943, and conducted division-level amphibious operations in New Guinea in 1943–44 and Borneo in 1945. Arguably, Australia's overly romantic focus on the trials of the battle of Kokoda has masked the significant success in combined-arms and joint warfare as the Second World War progressed.⁶ For much of the time the tactics employed were driven by equipment shortages and limited numbers of adequately trained personnel as much as by the inaccessibility of the battlefields. This combination led to a strong emphasis on battle cunning and initiative based on mastering local conditions.

During the Second World War the Army deployed nearly 400 000 troops overseas with another 350 000 stationed in Australia.⁷ The herculean efforts made to generate these numbers enabled Australia to raise 14 divisions, complemented by a range of highly capable special forces whose exploits have become better known in subsequent years.⁸ But such efforts involved national service, or conscription, for home defence duties at least.

THE 'POST-WAR' EXPERIENCE AND 'LESSONS' OF VIETNAM

Australian military historians David Horner and Michael Evans both observed that ever since the Boer War there was a trend towards offshore warfare and despite periods when Australia looked to home defence, when a crisis came, 'Australia saw that it was in its strategic interests to commit

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forces overseas'.⁹ That imperative to deploy forces overseas continued in the post-Vietnam War years.

Yet what is striking is the contrast between Australia's experience in the world wars, when so many troops were mobilised, and the far smaller forces maintained in the post-war years – even during times of regional conflict. A generation after the Second World War, for instance, during the Vietnam War, the Army peaked at just over 44 000 full-time personnel (including 28 000 volunteers) to sustain a reinforced, brigaded-sized, deployed task force.¹⁰ This was a far smaller force than Australia raised during the Second World War when Australians perceived that they faced an existential threat. This smaller force structure was a rational choice made by successive governments from the late 1940s onwards because they reckoned that with American strategic hegemony, Australia faced no direct threat that required mass mobilisation. Nonetheless, there was a perception that Australia had to make a contribution when called upon as an ally and/or as a responsible UN member. It was with this in mind that Australia contributed forces to the war in Korea from 1950 to 1953, to operations in Malaya and later Malaysia in the 1950s and early 1960s, and subsequently to Vietnam.

Despite Australia's relatively small contribution, the Vietnam War experience had a searing effect on the Australian consciousness. Australia's approach to military operations during the Vietnam War stood in stark contrast with the more aggressive tactics of Australia's more casualty-tolerant American allies. As a consequence, in relative and absolute terms, Australia suffered far fewer casualties than the Americans. Australia's approach sought to minimise own casualties using stealthy patrols, an approach influenced by experience alongside British forces in Malaya and Borneo. Indeed, infantry section- and platoon-sized teams had conducted sensitive cross-border 'Claret' patrols in Indonesian Borneo in which they demonstrated versatility and prowess with minimal casualties.¹¹ Even the number of casualties accrued in Vietnam (500 killed and 3129 wounded) was not that much greater than the number suffered during the much shorter Korean War (1500 casualties of whom 340 were killed).¹² And the Korean War transpired with no great controversy on Australia's home front.

What marked the Vietnam War experience from other post-war conflicts was that the scale of the commitment was seen as necessitating compulsory national service by conscription.¹³ Eventually the national consciousness was seared by the dissension over conscription. By the late 1960s Moratorium protests in the capital cities around the country rattled the conservative government that had sent conscripted troops to Vietnam.

Table 1: Army formation nomenclature

<i>Grouping name</i>	<i>Size</i>
Section/squad	8–12 people
Platoon/troop	20–35 people
Company/squadron	80–120 people
Battalion/regiment	400–800 people
Brigade/task force	3000–5000 people
Division	8000–15 000 people
Corps	Two or more divisions
Army	Multiple corps

The dissension echoed the divisive experience in the First World War and left Australian politics polarized for years. As a result, political leaders from Gough Whitlam to John Howard responded to the perceived limits of tolerance for casualties and for compulsory service for operations remote from Australia’s shores. In hindsight, many saw Vietnam as far away and of debatable significance for the direct defence of Australia.¹⁴ The Australian Government under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam quickly abandoned conscription and national service. The Army was tasked instead with developing and maintaining a smaller, purely voluntary force. Thereafter, while Australia was not facing a direct and imminent threat on the scale experienced in 1942, conscription was to be avoided. This meant that in considering any force contribution to operations abroad, every effort had to be made to avoid contributions on a scale that could possibly later demand the reintroduction of conscription.

The Regular Army that emerged as a result after the Vietnam War was a small, professional force with troop numbers hovering near 30 000.¹⁵ With such a small full-time force, the Army focused on maintaining core capabilities. This force consisted of one active-duty division of three combat brigades (one each focused on light, mechanised-and-parachute, and amphibious skills) and two reserve divisions (and, from 1991, only one reserve division) of six combat brigades designed, in part, to form the core of an expansion force if the need arose (see table 1). In addition, there were aviation, logistic and other specialist support elements. The post-Vietnam War Australian Army was a small force, particularly when compared with the United States Army’s 10 active-duty divisions consisting of 40 active-duty combat brigades and 75 support brigades deployed worldwide, notably in West Germany and South Korea.¹⁶ The Australian

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Army was small even when compared with neighbouring armies like Indonesia's, which at more than 340 000 troops was more than ten times the size of Australia's, albeit with most of it focused on its nation-building role. But with little evident regional threats against which forces could be structured, and with Australia's principal ally by far the most powerful nation on earth, there were no compelling demands for a larger army.

In effect, as the following chapters attest, the political leadership of Australia experienced what could be described as a post-Vietnam War casualty cringe and a heightened consciousness of the political risk associated with deploying armed forces abroad. As a result, it ensured that the Army focused on the direct defence of Australia and, beyond that, made only carefully calibrated contributions to operations with strong international mandates and limited political risk. Such operations were marked by small-footprint, limited-scope commitments in support of Australia's major ally as well as collective security obligations globally.

Notwithstanding the difficulties over Vietnam, many Australians have been particularly proud of their Army, its heritage and its prominent place in Australian consciousness. But that heritage, for most people, has been understood in terms of a simple approach to soldiering and warfare, even though warfare itself has always been challenging and complex. What is more, traditional Australian military history has tended to focus on the major wars: the world wars and, in recent years, Vietnam and Korea. But as the leading Australian military historian, David Horner, has argued, the experience of the last couple of decades is equally worthy of study.¹⁷ Certainly the heightened operational tempo in the face of a series of 'non-traditional' security challenges that emerged in the late 1990s accentuated the need for adaptation and a broadening of the notion of security. This broader rubric saw not just insurgencies but also natural disasters and humanitarian crises prompt the deployment of forces on operations.

Particularly in the post-Cold War period, after 1989, Australia ventured into more ambitious force contributions to places close by. Thus when the neighbourhood experienced calamity, Australia played the lead-nation role on military operations in Bougainville, East Timor (also known as Timor-Leste)¹⁸ and Solomon Islands. But by then, experience in Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda and elsewhere contributed to rebuilding political leaders' confidence in using the Army without fear of drastic domestic political repercussions. Successive governments adopted this cautious approach of employing an all-volunteer force. Perhaps this limited approach to the size and cost of offshore deployments stemmed from the largely optional nature of the deployments undertaken from

1972 to 2007. By and large, these operations were seen as being in the national interest, although they were not directly or immediately related to defending the Australian continent. Australia therefore had the luxury of being able to decide for itself the size and type of force it would contribute.

THE FIVE REASONS FOR PROWESS

Apart from employing only volunteers, the Army's success at regaining its place as a politically neutral and emblematic national institution had much to do with the success of the many far-flung, post-Vietnam War operations. Underlying this process five key factors were at work that could best be described as the Army's five reasons for prowess. Critics may argue over the exact number and the exact definition of the factors. But they serve as a useful benchmark for a reflection on the Army's journey of rehabilitation since 1972. The five reasons help explain how the Army regained and then maintained its place as an iconic national institution. The experience over the period from Whitlam to Howard demonstrates that the Army was capable of completing assigned tasks without undue controversy, in part because many of the tasks were uncontroversial. The five reasons do not comprehensively define the Army's capabilities, but they help explain how the Army responded to events. Hence they feature throughout as guideposts for reflection on how the Army adapted and sought to overcome the challenges faced in the intervening years.

REASON I: INDIVIDUAL TRAINING

The first reason for the Army's prowess concerns the creation of common individual training and education institutions. These reinforced the understanding of the Army's various components as part of a combined-arms team. In turn, that team was reliant on the capabilities of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to achieve maximum effectiveness. These training institutions were epitomised by the Royal Military College (RMC) Duntroon, established in 1911 (having later absorbed other officer training institutions, particularly the Officer Cadet School at Portsea, Victoria) and by the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) established in 1986.¹⁹ These institutions are vital for the Army's ability to learn and adapt. While inspired by the prospect of financial savings expected to accrue, ADFA was established

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in part on the promise of better inter-service cooperation. Its creation was set against the bitter enmity between service chiefs that reflected the intensity of inter-service rivalry.

It took more than a generation before Duntroon graduates would emerge as senior commanders in the Australian Army in the mid-twentieth century. Since then the influence of that institution on the Army's professionalism has been profound and overwhelmingly positive. Duntroon and the other officer training institutions helped the Army establish an impressive reputation both as a national institution and as a fighting and peace-keeping force. Duntroon provided for a shared military ethos of ethical leadership by example. Graduates went on to become unit commanders, staff officers and, eventually, senior military officers. The ethos was deeply egalitarian, with selection premised on ability, not wealth or connections. A distinctive feature was that respect from soldiers was earned rather than simply demanded. This was the only practical approach to take for such a unique and predominantly egalitarian society as Australia.²⁰

A prominent example was General Peter Cosgrove who, having trained at Duntroon, served in Vietnam and gained experience as a commander and staff officer, then went on to command Australia's most challenging military operation since the Vietnam War in East Timor in 1999.²¹ Apart from Duntroon, a range of military schools were created for the various specialisations required by a modern Army. These schools also generated prowess in individual training. Although the School of Artillery dated back to 1885, other schools were relatively young, because the pre-1939 Army was a militia force with the exception of the Regular force coastal gunners and engineers. Most of the schools were developed under the stewardship of Australia's senior-most military officer, General Sir Thomas Blamey, during the Second World War. Those schools maintained the Army's standard operating procedures and higher-level operational concepts to provide guidance on Australia's way of conducting military operations. There were also some important joint warfare courses that brought the three armed services together. The benefit of this approach was reinforced by through-career education, represented most prominently by the Command and Staff College program for 'middle management' officers at the rank of major.

Beyond staff college, however, there was limited opportunity for further education and training. Some questioned whether the system that generated an officer like Cosgrove, who was able to operate well at the operational and strategic level, was deliberate or an accident. After all, the Army had not focused on training for large-scale military campaigns

incorporating forces above the levels of battalion and brigade. In Korea and Vietnam, for instance, Australians commanded a brigade-sized force at most – whereas they had commanded at levels up to Army during the Second World War. Australia's experience in East Timor pointed to a need for more than a purely theoretical ability to operate at higher than brigade level.²²

The Army sought to maintain a culture of learning, operating in a manner consistent with the concepts Peter Senge described as the 'learning organization'.²³ There still was a difference between education and experience and the Army tended to value experience over education, but it recognised the need to blend education and experience (and initiative) to develop its leaders, as well as a desire to learn from others. The experience on operations was a significant agent for change and adaptation. The more operations the Army was involved in, the more capable it became.

Still, the education and training programs were not enough, and there were several instances in which the Army had to relearn lessons learned by previous generations, as did the Army's political masters. The following chapters attest that lessons had to be experienced repeatedly before they were understood and truly learned. The predisposition to learn was accentuated by the surge in operational tempo, providing a greater source of lessons and a greater imperative to learn and adapt.

The Army's predisposition to learn was confirmed by the results of an inquiry, commissioned by the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) in 2005, into learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments.²⁴ The inquiry endorsed the concept of the Army being a learning organisation and recognised the positive effects of the mandatory training in occupational health and safety, fraud prevention, ethics, equity and diversity. Indeed, operational experience was forcing the Army to understand more fully the significance of achieving consent, understanding local culture and adopting a values-based approach (cognisant of local customs and norms) to enhancing the prospects of success on operations.²⁵

REASON 2: COLLECTIVE FIELD TRAINING

The second reason for prowess was the emphasis on collective field training exercises and 'battle evaluation'. Collective training brought together individual skills to amount to more than the sum of the parts. The ability to plan and undertake multifaceted combat exercises was a sign of a first-order army that could deploy from the barracks, simulating an operational deployment far from its home base.

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Vietnam War-era collective training was epitomised by the Jungle Training Centre at Canungra, Queensland, where battle evaluation was supervised on field exercises by seasoned veterans. Training would culminate in a battalion group exercise, usually at Shoalwater Bay. Veterans' experience fostered some adaptation as enemy tactics and circumstances changed.²⁶ Indeed, many of the lessons learned afterwards echoed those learned during the Vietnam War.²⁷

Collective training reinforced the need to operate as a team with a joint (i.e. inter-service) perspective. The increasingly joint focus of the Army was influenced by joint foundational individual and collective training with inputs from the RAN and RAAF. The following chapters demonstrate how that joint perspective expanded, becoming increasingly an inter-agency perspective, particularly where Australia had a lead role. The inter-agency approach reflected the significance of working on operations alongside other arms of government including police forces, diplomats and aid agencies, notably the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). Other civil society organisations would feature as well.

REASON 3: REGIMENTAL OR CORPS IDENTITIES

The first two reasons for prowess, individual and collective training, became known as the Army's 'foundation warfighting training'. The third reason was the Army's various regimental or corps identities. In many ways these echoed the experience of other Commonwealth armies, notably the British, Canadian and New Zealand forces. The identity concerned internal specialisation, whereby relatively tight-knit communities of experts in the component arms and services of the Army (the regiments or corps) developed family-like bonds of trust and friendship. The Army's small size contributed to the degree of familiarity achieved within a corps grouping. In this context, excellence could be fostered, enabling the niche areas to work together. The aggregate came to be known as the 'combined arms team', which built and relied on trust in respective specialisations.

The Australian Army's regimental or corps identities had close links with their British antecedents, although the two countries' systems differed in a number of ways. The Australian Army retained the regimental system despite having dabbled in American organisational concepts via the short-lived Pentropic organisation in the early 1960s modelled on the short-lived US Army pentagonal 'Pentomic' divisional model. In addition,