1918: DEFINING VICTORY

THE WAY FORWARD: 1918 AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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As the First World War drew to a close Australia possessed one of the best fighting forces that any army had produced during the conflict. In the war's final battles, Hamel, Amiens, Mont St Quentin and the breaching of the Hindenburg Line, the Australians repeatedly exhibited the balance, planning, drive and finesse of a highly experienced and capable military force. Their skill at arms overwhelmed the Germans and relentlessly drove the enemy back towards Germany. Unfortunately, the experience of the Second World War would demonstrate that the military skill of the Australians was neither native nor permanent. As war again approached, the Australian Army was a mere shadow of its former greatness. By 1939 the effectiveness of its formations had declined to such an extent that the Army had no offensive capability and, even more alarming, the nation was virtually defenceless. Despite success against the Italians in North Africa, the campaigns in Greece, Crete, Syria and Malaya painfully revealed the difference between the memory of the Great War and the reality of the Second World War. This essay will attempt to explain why the Army, during the years after the First World War, was unable to find the way forward that would allow it to build on its experience and to forge an even more efficient and effective fighting force with which to wage the Second World War.

The post First World War years were without a doubt extraordinarily difficult ones for the leaders of the Australian Army. After the war's conclusion, its senior officers had sought to implement an ambitious program for the interwar Army. At their 1920 conference they set the force's requirements as an organisation of seven divisions, as well as a training program consisting of 13 weeks of camps of continuous instruction. Despite the government assenting to this, the ministries of Hughes, Bruce, Scullin and Lyons would all follow policies of extreme fiscal frugality which would ensure that the Army remained a hollow shell and guaranteed that it would not achieve its organisational, establishment, equipment and training objectives. This phenomenon was not limited to Australia but was widespread throughout the Empire as policy makers emphasised disarmament at almost any cost and voters demanded peace at nearly any price. Instead of a force of seven combat capable Divisions the military would focus its efforts on the preparation of leaders—officers and NCOs—in order to facilitate the army's expansion to its planned size upon mobilisation.

The resources allocated to armed forces during peacetime are invariably less than the level desired by military leaders. In a non-war environment, the measure by which the effectiveness of an army's leadership should be assessed is not the agenda which it seeks to implement, as this is always likely to exceed the forbearance of the Treasury, but rather what it is able to accomplish with the level of support actually received. Therefore, in a period of fiscal stringency, the formulation of ambitious plans becomes meaningless, as their realisation is so unlikely. Moreover, such plans can be dangerous if they distract attention from the attainment of policy and prevent the achievement of the potential that is possible with the level of resources provided. The gulf between what the senior officers wanted for the Australian Army's organisation, establishment and readiness and what the nation's political leaders were willing to provide was vast, and remained so almost until the outbreak of war. By this criteria, the leaders of the interwar Australian Army must be found wanting, for they set priorities which failed to maximise the strength of their forces given the monies allocated, while at the same time stubbornly advocating an agenda which was manifestly contrary to government policy.

Despite the hostile political and social environment, the interwar period was not without opportunity. The Army contained a pool of combat veterans who were acknowledged leaders in the art of war and their experiences should have provided the Army with a sound foundation upon which to build. Instead of focusing on this talent, the Army's leaders obsessively pursued other objectives and were unable to conceive policy options which might

have instilled a greater level of effectiveness in the forces under their command. As a consequence the Army would lose the institutional skill and knowledge built up so painfully during the Great War, thereby forcing it to relearn the hard lessons of war on the battlefield after the commencement of the Second World War.

Although the postwar legacy of the Australian Army is the singular concern of this essay, it is not possible, or sensible, to restrict its analysis so narrowly. The Australian military experience during the interwar period is inseparable from that of the British Army and is closely bound to the wider debate on Imperial security. It is not surprising that Australian dependency upon Britain, which existed before the Great War and which both parties nurtured during the conflict, would continue to exert significant influence throughout the ensuing peace. Between the wars the Australian Army would rely on Britain for the testing, design and provision of its major weapon systems, for the higher-level training of its officers, and for the study of advancements in the military art. Furthermore, the ethos of the Australian Army was closely intertwined with that of the British. An editorial in the *Journal of the Royal Military College of Australia*, published shortly after the war's conclusion, suggested the strength of the fealty between the two forces. It emphatically opined that Australian officers were 'Britons overseas and our Army is a British Army. Our object should be to make it more so in every respect'.[1] Under such circumstances, this essay's reference to developments within the British Army is unavoidable.

This essay will also shape its arguments by comparing the interwar development of the Australian Army with that of the *Reichswehr*, the name given to the army of the Weimar Republic. In contrast to the British and Australian forces, the German Imperial Army ended the First World War as a broken force. However, *Reichswehr* leaders would rebuild their army into an extremely capable fighting machine which had a considerably better understanding of the complexities and opportunities of modern war, at least at the tactical level, than its future opponents. Moreover, they succeeded in an economic, political and social arena which was arguably even more daunting than that which Australia's military leaders faced. Interwar Germany suffered acute economic and political problems not experienced in Australia, including hyper-inflation, a civil war, and the imposition of a new form of government. German military leaders also laboured under the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty. These set the army's size at 100,000 men, including no more than 4000 officers, arranged into seven Infantry and three Cavalry Divisions with only two corps headquarters, a force not much larger than that established as the objective for Australia by its senior officers. As well, the peace treaty denied Germany modern weapons including tanks, heavy artillery, submarines, military aircraft and gas.[2] These weapon systems were also effectively unavailable to Australian military planners for most of the interwar, although for different reasons. While the *Reichswehr* did violate some clauses of the Versailles agreement, this alone is not enough to explain its leadership's success in laying a sound foundation for a modern Army, an accomplishment that proved beyond the capability of Australian military leaders.[3]

What of Lessons?

One of the critical differences between the British and Australian Armies and the German Army during the interwar period was their attitude towards intellectual pursuits. After more than four years of carnage, the conclusion of most British officers was that nothing of real note had occurred during the war, certainly nothing of sufficient consequence that would require them to modify their understanding of war. For these officers, the war's end was perceived not as a way forward to anything significant but rather as an opportunity to return the army to its pre-war conditions and restore the regiments to their proper role as imperial garrisons. The Germans, however, drew the opposite conclusion. They believed that the conduct of the campaigns in 1918 suggested that a fundamental change in the nature of modern war had occurred, and consequently significant innovation in the conception of warfare was possible. After the Armistice, key German military decision-makers would see the interwar years not as an opportunity to restore the pre-war status quo but rather as a chance to reshape the parameters of war.

Because of these attitudes, the decision-makers of both organisations would take dramatically different approaches to the issue of learning the lessons of the Great War. The British, in fact, were simply not interested in learning any lessons at all, and instead placed their intellectual effort into maintaining the same perception of war that had existed before the beginning of the First World War. As Brian Bond and Williamson Murray have suggested, the British Army would have done considerably better in 1939 if it had ruthlessly prepared for war as it existed in 1918. Unfortunately, 'British military institutions ... made every effort to escape the realities of the last war and to forget the hard lessons of that conflict'.[4]

The British Army would not make any effort to study the Great War until 1932, 14 years after its conclusion and sufficient time to allow most lessons to recede from the institution's memory. In that year the CIGS, General Sir George Milne, appointed Lieutenant-General Sir Walter Kirke to chair a high-level Committee on Certain Lessons of the Great War. Milne charged the committee with the responsibility of deducing the lessons of the war and determining if the Army was correctly applying them in its manuals and training programmes. Kirke submitted a critical report later in the year but his findings were ultimately suppressed. Milne had intended a wide distribution for the report but his successor, General Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, limited its circulation to the senior ranks. He then instructed the preparation of a sanitised version for the rest of the officer corps. Montgomery-Massingberd had parts omitted and changed the significance of that which remained in areas concerning future doctrine, equipment and organisation. For example, Kirke's report as distributed contained an analysis of artillery fire which was completely contrary to the experience of the Western Front. During the war, British gunners had been highly innovative, imaginative officers who had thoroughly mastered scientific methods of fire. The report, however, stated that survey and indirect fire were not necessarily the primary methods of directing firepower. Throughout the interwar period, gunnery officers demonstrated a widely held preference for direct fire and in a future war they intended to rely upon observed fire and adjust shot by the eye. In effect, Montgomery-Massingberd had distorted the committee's findings so that they would conform to his Napoleonic-based interpretation of warfare.[5]

Unfortunately, Montgomery-Massingberd's subterfuge was not an isolated incident but a reflection of an officer corps' determination to maintain a perceived reality in the face of overwhelming evidence of fundamental change. In 1920, when the content of BH Liddell-Hart's revision of the *Infantry Manual* annoyed his superiors, they simply replaced the objectionable parts with sections, including an entire chapter, from the manual's 1911 edition. Liddell Hart had seen the rewrite as an opportunity to draw upon the Army's experiences during the war, precisely the opposite of what the senior officers had intended.[6]

The British Army's inability to advance their understanding of war is a symptom of what can be termed an intellectual preference for 'revealed doctrine'. Instead of showing a willingness to explore new ideas the British Army defended the existing interpretation of the nature of war as a fixed article of faith and forced any advances in the military art into the current structure, without making any modifications in the structure itself. The best example of this tendency is in the institution's reaction to mechanisation. Tanks played an important role in Britain's success in the First World War, and during the interwar period British armour theoreticians helped shape the debate regarding their future employment. However, the writings of advocates such as Liddell Hart and JFC Fuller had little effect on their own Army and Britain would lose its lead in armoured warfare. The British were unable to conceive the possibilities which mobile warfare offered and instead insisted that armour had to conform to a style of fighting in which the central focus of battle remained on the infantry. Armoured units had to subsume their capabilities to the requirements of the infantry, and institutional preference, unlike in Germany, would not allow them an independent role in battle.[7]

Germany took a more enlightened approach to the study of the lessons of the First World War. During the interwar period the *Reichswehr* was not a powerful force and it was unable to defend Germany. When France occupied the Ruhr in 1923 the German Army could only stand by and watch. However, the officer charged with its postwar reconstruction, General Hans von Seeckt, sought to build up the army into the world's best, from a qualitative perspective. This would then serve as a solid basis for expansion when the opportunity

permitted. In this ambition he would largely succeed. Late in the interwar period an American military observer in Berlin would note that 'the *Reichswehr* was, in the opinion of all competent foreign observers, the most highly trained, efficient, forward looking officer corps in the world'.[8]

In late 1919 Seeckt initiated a comprehensive program to collect and study the experiences of the First World War. In contrast to the lackadaisical attitude displayed by the British, Seeckt believed that, 'It is absolutely necessary to put the experience of war in a broad light and collect this experience while the impressions won on the battlefield are still fresh and a major proportion of the experienced officers are still in leading positions'.[9] His goal was to provide the *Reichswehr* with a new doctrine, soundly based upon the advances in military affairs that had occurred during the war. This programme would involve 57 committees and subcommittees of officers, from all levels, to study all aspects of the war. Committees would consider topics such as troop morale, river crossings, military weather observation, tank and mountain warfare and leadership. He would authorise additional committees as needed, and over 400 officers would participate in the process. By 1921 the *Reichswehr* had begun to issue new manuals and regulations which incorporated the findings of the committees, and these would gradually lay the basis for a uniform doctrine at every level of training and provide for a common approach to tactical situations.[10]

Seeckt created an environment that placed a high value on intellectual activities and which was designed to encourage innovation. He deliberately set out to change the German Army's interpretation of war in order to establish a system which would build upon the experiences of the First World War. Innovative *Reichswehr* officers operated in a climate which saw opportunity in change. British thinkers, however, were individuals attempting to move a system which did not value innovative pursuits. What Fuller and Liddell Hart required was a climate that would promote innovation. Instead, their efforts would lead to their marginalisation and removal from the service. Even senior officers such as Milne, who as CIGS did attempt to explore new options, could not move the institution's determination not to change. After Milne's retirement, his successors made sure to undermine his efforts at reform.[11]

While the Germans produced manuals that looked forward, the British revised theirs so that they looked backwards. The postwar revision of the *Field Service Regulations* (*FSR*) provides a case in point. The FSR was the Army's critical operational manual whose ideas underlay the preparation of the force's other manuals and which guided the service's preparation for war. It fulfilled the same function for Australia. The 1924 edition is so similar to the original 1909 edition that it is almost as if the First World War had not occurred, or at least had failed to provide the authors with anything new to say. Critical parts are identical in language or intent. For example, both versions state that 'Success in war depends more on moral than on physical qualities'. The revised version does contain a section on tanks, but makes it clear that their only purpose is to help the advance of the infantry. In other areas the updated *FSR* ignored the lessons of the Western Front. The 1909 edition had limited the role of cavalry to that of mounted infantry who would rely upon firepower. The 1924 version not only saw an ongoing need for cavalry but restored to the horsemen their lance and sabre, in addition to their rifles.[12]

Fuller summed up the problem with the standard of British manuals. Suggesting the inadequacy of the *FSR*, he argued that good tactical training demanded two books, one which dealt with present day warfare and another which dealt with future warfare. He believed that military affairs after the First World War were in a period of transition and that armies needed to prepare for future possibilities rather than simply present actualities. He presciently warned that if armies did not take this precaution they would be indifferently prepared to wage future war, but he was too generous in crediting the postwar *FSR* with providing for the current needs of the army. In 1932 Fuller published his own work, entitled *Lectures on FSR III*, which he hoped would provide for the army's future requirements. The reception of the continent to *Lectures on FSR III* was enthusiastic. In Britain, however, its release barely caused a ripple.[13]

The British aversion to the serious study of war and the Commonwealth's reliance upon the 'mother country' for guidance in military affairs thus had serious ramifications for the Australian Army. The leaders of the Australian Army harboured similar attitudes which imbued their institutional ethos with its own version of intellectual apathy. The educational priorities of the Commandants of the Royal Military College of Australia (RMC) illustrate this point. The RMC's Commandant in 1920, Major-General JG Legge, began a trend which would continue throughout the interwar years. He proudly observed in his annual report that 'little change had been made in the curriculum since the time of the first Commandant, except to organize arrangements and include subjects, which were part of his plan'.[14] The war had intervened since Major-General William T Bridges had established the military college in 1911 but Legge, who served at Gallipoli and the Western Front during the war, saw no reason to tinker with the founder's plan. Later in the period little regarding the institution's academic qualifications had changed. Brett Lodge in his biography of Lieutenant-General John Lavarack, who would head RMC during 1933-34, rightly notes that the Commandant was more interested in the prowess of the officer cadets on the sports field than in the classroom. Although Lavarack was considered one of the Army's best minds, his report for 1933 allowed only a brief sentence for the college's academics but waxed for two paragraphs on its sporting accomplishments.[15]

When RMC did make changes to the curriculum they were unfortunately a by-product of the Army's policy of basing its intellectual focus upon materials provided by Britain. In his 1934 report, Lavarack noted that the process of revising the syllabus for military history, in order to utilise the *FSR* as the primary interpretative mechanism, was now complete. A manual which presented an idealised interpretation of war more suited to the age of Napoleon rather than one which addressed the realities of war so painfully learned on the Western Front was now the basis of instruction for one of the RMC's most important classes. The 1929 RMC report observed that the officer cadets had made constant reference to the *FSR* during their study of military history. Furthermore, the class had placed emphasis upon the principles of war it advanced with the 'object of showing how adherence to these principles has produced success and how reverse has spelt failure'.[16] Of course, this objective would have been even more soundly met if the text used had itself been based upon a modern and honest interpretation of war.

The Australian Army adopted British publications as training manuals as the basis of the force's training and doctrinal direction for the entire interwar period.[17] The Military Board made this clear in 1921 when it incorporated the *FSR* into its annual training instructions.[18] This policy would prove detrimental to the development of the Australian Army as it would encourage the spreading of poorly thought out ideas and intellectual laziness throughout the institution and it would prevent the development of sound, forward-looking tactical ideas and preparations by the Army in general. Further reinforcing these tendencies was the policy of exchanging officers between the two forces or of sending an Australian staff officer to Britain for further study or experience. When these officers returned they brought with them an intensive exposure to outmoded ideas or to concepts that were more suited to the British environment.[19]

A few examples of the effect of these policies must suffice. In 1927 a British officer visited Australia to give a series of lectures to officers. He impressed upon the officers of the 11th Mixed Brigade the fullness and completeness of the *FSR* and he stressed to his audience the need to understand these 'rules of the game'. The Australians were not meant to test the correctness of the *FSR* but rather to accept their principles without question. The ideas found in the *FSR* made their way into Australian training exercises. In 1930 a promotional tactical exercise without troops did not include any tanks or armoured cars and only employed aviation for reconnaissance. It did, however, feature cavalry in a shock role including clashes between sabre wielding horsemen.[20]

Interwar advances in mechanisation policy offer a prime example to further illustrate the differences in the institutional approaches of the British and Australian Armies with that of the German Army. Von Seeckt displayed an early interest in mechanisation and the intellectual environment he created encouraged experimentation without risk to one's career. A number of officers emerged, such as Ernst Volckheim, Wilhelm Brandt and Heinz Guderian, who

would become advocates of the tank and who would participate in a vibrant interwar debate on the future of armoured warfare. By 1927 the *Reichswehr's* training section had concluded that in a future war the tank would probably be the decisive weapon, unlike the British who continued to insist on the supremacy of the infantry. There was opposition to mechanisation within the German Army, and the traditional cavalry mentality was not without influence, but bright officers were also given the opportunity to develop their ideas and, unlike in the British Army, they knew that these would receive a fair evaluation.[21]

The *Reichswehr* would hold its first exercise employing motorised infantry in 1921. Additional exercises followed in 1923, and the use of motorised vehicles in training programmes became routine. In 1924 the German Army issued a recommended reading list on motorised and mechanised topics, and articles on these subjects were featured in military periodicals.[22] The Germans would also incorporate large numbers of dummy tanks into annual exercises. While these vehicles were nothing more than a wooden and canvas frame fitted around an automobile body or even a bicycle frame, they did allow the Germans to test the weapon's potential and also to participate in combined arms activities. The Germans did not need a real tank because their principal interest was not the vehicle itself but rather its place within an emerging system of waging war. Their first requirement was that of testing a theory, while at the same time identifying the weapon capabilities that would be required in order for it to fulfil its assigned role.

While their methods were perhaps crude, the Germans would succeed in laying the basis for the armoured doctrine which they would use to such effect in the next war. The Germans had also brought the tank into the broader context of Army operations, rather than letting its development occur in isolation in the hands of enthusiasts. This openness meant that the entire army was familiar with the potential of armoured warfare, rather than just a single regiment. Furthermore, when real tanks did enter production under the Nazis, they did so within a structure which had already begun to think about their use and which had already solved many of their operational problems.

The contrast with the priorities in the British and Australian Armies could not have been greater. Britain ended the First World War as a leader in armour developments, and its officer corps would produce some of the leading, forward thinking minds of the interwar period. Despite these advantages, the British army would concede its lead and by the onset of Second World War it would be well behind the Germans in both the theory of tank warfare and in weapon development. Furthermore, institutional preference would constrain innovative officers from successfully advancing novel ideas. For example, at the 1927 manoeuvres the directing staff reprimanded Sir Frederick Pile, a future general, for 'undertaking a dangerous act and for doing something which certainly was not war'. Pile had been in command of the Brigade's armoured cars. Instead of holding back with the infantry he dashed off and caught the opposing side in the midst of its deployment. Pile's armoured cars delivered their opponent a nasty surprise, upset their manoeuvre and placed them at a disadvantage for the rest of the exercise. The German Army would have rewarded such initiative whereas, to the British, Pile had violated a stereotype of war which they were determined to maintain.[23]

Instead of intellectual development, the British made the quest for a perfectly designed armoured fighting vehicle the priority of their interwar mechanisation programme. This emphasis was in part the result of an attempt to reduce the cost of equipment purchases by getting the machines right the first time, but it was also a reflection of a determination to fit weapon systems into an existing structure, and once so incorporated not allow them to evolve further. The British, therefore, intended to deny adaptation any role in their interpretation of warfare. As a consequence no one in either Britain or Australia appears to have been responsible for developing armoured doctrine, and the debate which existed immediately after the war between First World War tank enthusiasts did not cross over to a wider audience in the other regiments. Furthermore, the focus upon design perfection also meant that the Army lacked sufficient stocks of vehicles for trials. As a result the Army forced itself into the position where design would determine use rather than, more appropriately, the other way around. The British considered such an exploration unnecessary because the *FSR* already provided the required rules for incorporating armoured fighting vehicles into the army's method of waging war. That the *FSR* did this without any reference to changes in the nature of war as a result of the First World War did not appear to concern anyone.[24]

Australian military leaders did foresee an important role for tanks in their force structure. The Army's order of battle made provision for four battalions of tanks, although it deferred their raising pending the acquisition of equipment. In addition, increased mobility was an important issue as senior officers recognised the potential of motorisation or mechanisation to concentrate scattered forces more quickly at threatened points. However, like the British, the Australians saw no need to study the intended employment of mechanised forces or debate the potential for armoured forces to change the nature of warfare. Instead they, too, saw the process of mechanisation in design terms, particularly the need to develop an optimum weapon platform before undertaking the acquisition of a large number of vehicles. This policy would remain in place throughout the interwar period, even after rearmament had begun on the eve of war. In a major policy statement issued in December 1938 the Army continued to define the issue of mechanisation from the perspective of organisation and equipment design. The only mention of how the Army planned to employ tanks was an indirect reference to British manuals.[25]

The Australian Army did not have an internal body dedicated to mechanisation development until 1931 when the Military Board announced the formation of the Mechanical Warfare Committee, whose duties included the provision of advice on matters concerning mechanisation and motorisation. The driving force behind its establishment, however, was not the desire to study the implications that advances in tanks held for modern war but rather the belief that the Army should identify the types of vehicles in the Commonwealth which might be suitable for military use. The Military Board concluded that:

> Mechanized and armoured vehicles are taking an increasingly prominent part in war preparations and a great deal of experimental work must be undertaken in connection with the adaptation of locally available mechanical vehicles, tractors, etc, to meet Army requirements on mobilization.[26]

In 1934 Major-General Julius H Bruche, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), raised the status of the Mechanical Warfare Committee to that of a directorate within Army Headquarters. Redesignating it as the Directorate of Mechanization, Bruche also provided its members with an expanded outline of the Army's most urgent requirements for their investigations. In order of priority they were:

> a) A light armoured car.
>
> b) The selection of a tractor for use with Medium Artillery.
>
> c) The investigation of Field Artillery traction both for Cavalry and Infantry work.
>
> d) An improved armoured machine gun carrier for use with the Infantry.
>
> e) Selection of commercial vehicles for use in ... war.
>
> f) Design, test and preparation for manufacture of special bodies required in war.[27]

Bruche maintained the Army's emphasis on equipment design and acquisition and made no effort to divert resources to doctrinal development. It is perhaps not surprising that the Director of Mechanisation served on the staff of the Quarter-Master General rather than that of the CGS.[28]

In March 1931 the tank wing of the Small Arms school began testing a wooden 'mock-up' of an armoured car, the only example of the Army's use of a dummy vehicle. Although problems existed, the experiments were successful enough to warrant the construction of a light steel version which in turn was followed by the building of an armoured car protected by bullet proof plate. In 1935 the Army considered the fate of the vehicle after a major trial conducted by the 1st Armoured Car Regiment. The unit's commander was not impressed. He concluded that the vehicle as designed was unable to fulfil its primary role of reconnaissance, and was at the same time inadequate to serve in a delaying action. As a consequence the Army

authorised no further testing on this version but began the process of design from scratch. However, by 1937 all work had halted and the Army abandoned its armoured car project. The other area of significant investigation by the committee consisted of testing the suitability of various tractors for use as prime movers for the artillery. This task, also, was simply an exercise in determining equipment suitability, and no effort was made to incorporate the increased mobility which tractors provided into an improved method of waging war.[29]

Reinforcing the suggestion that the Army was only interested in the identification of the perfect weapon system, rather than the place of tanks in modern war, is the degree to which the Army committed its personnel to mechanised training. By 1937 only a single Australian officer had undergone training in England. Captain EW Lamperd had done a course in 1927 but he had subsequently died in a road accident. The next officer given the opportunity to train with the Royal Tank Corps was RNL Hopkins, who went to England in 1937 accompanied by a single warrant officer. The motivation behind his secondment was the imminent arrival of ten light tanks and the need to provide them with a commander who had some understanding of mechanical warfare. Hopkins was not expected back until April 1939, much too late as events unfolded to effect the Army's mechanical development before the onset of war. Pending his return, the Australian Army had to bring out a British officer to undertake the initial organisation and training of the light tank unit. However, this officer was subsequently found unsuitable for the task and left his position early without having had any significant effect on armour developments in Australia.[30]

The greatest failure of the British and, by default, the Australian Armies during the interwar period was their leadership's unwillingness to take seriously the intellectual preparation for war, in contrast to their German rivals. During a period of transition in the art of war, British and Australian military leaders failed both to promote an environment in which bright officers could develop and test their ideas, and to foster an institutional ethos which encouraged innovation. Fuller warned of the consequences of this practice. In his *Lectures on FSR III* he observed:

> The only way to prevent ... ossification of [the] mind is to accept nothing as fixed, to realize that circumstances of war are ever-changing, and that, consequently, organization, administration, strategy and tactics must change also; and if during peace time we cannot change them in fact, we nevertheless change them in theory, and so be mentally prepared when circumstances require that changes should be made.[31]

Fuller was right. By 1939 the Australian Army had lost the vision of war that it had possessed in 1918.

An Organisational Obsession

Soon after the conclusion of the First World War the senior officers of the Commonwealth met in Melbourne in order to determine the future organisation of the Army.[32] They would decide that the nation's defence required a force of four Infantry Divisions, three Mixed Brigades (which could form a fifth division) and two Cavalry Divisions plus appropriate corps, army and L of C troops. In addition, this establishment would also provide troops for the garrisons for the coastal defence as well as the staff of the Permanent Military Forces. The organisation would require 130,000 at its peacetime establishment, expanding to more than 180,000 upon mobilisation for war. The vast majority of the necessary personnel would serve in the Citizen Military Forces (the Militia). Although the plan received the government's assent, the economic and political policies of a series of interwar ministries would make its effective attainment an impossibility. However, the Army's leaders never forsook their original concept and they would maintain, throughout the interwar period, that it was the minimum force structure required by the nation. In fact, so determined were the military leaders, and so obsessively focused on achieving the recommendations of the Conference of Senior Officers, that they would ignore or undermine government directives which they believed threatened the achievement of the Army's organisation. In addition, they would make policy choices aimed at sustaining the organisational structure, even at the expense of creating a force capable of waging a modern war.[33]

The units that the Army raised after the war provided for a force which was composed almost exclusively of the traditional Infantry, Cavalry and Field Artillery arms. As part of the disposal of surplus equipment, the British Army gave Australia sufficient equipment for the raising of the recommended five Infantry Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions. However, the Australian Army did not receive any nondivisional armaments such as heavy or medium guns, tanks, or mechanical transport. The Conference of Senior Officers did recommend that the government purchase stocks of these items but the government refused to allocate funds, except for a handful of devices. Jeffrey Grey has noted that it was in precisely the areas of heavy artillery, armour and motorised vehicles that the most significant advances in the military art occurred. However, the army's leaders would consistently make the maintenance of their cavalry and infantry dependent divisions their priority.[34]

Despite Prime Minister William Hughes's agreement to the senior officers' programme, cut-backs to the military vote following the signing of the Washington Naval Treaties in 1922 and the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 ensured that the Army's leaders would not have the resources to achieve their goal. Instead of a force of 130,000 the Army's establishment would quickly decline to under 30,000 and it would not recover until just before the beginning of the Second World War. Even though the defence estimate throughout the interwar period was insufficient to support the organisation established in 1920 the Army would insist on retaining all seven Divisions. The Army's leaders refused to reduce the organisation even though this meant that Infantry Battalions, Light Horse Regiments and Artillery Batteries would all exist at establishments which were far too small to result in effective units. For example, in 1936 the Army had only a single Battalion with an establishment of more than 400 (412 in the linked 30th/51st Battalion) while the 5th Battalion, with a membership of just 240, was much more typical.[35] The Council of Defence did propose the Army's reorganisation in 1935 but the CGS successfully opposed the review, even though he admitted that the present organisation was tenuous and that the units were little more than skeleton formations. Instead, he insisted that the formations, no matter how small, still served as a basis for expansion.[36]

Leaders, such as the Inspector General Lieutenant-General HG Chauvel, justified these steps by redefining the purpose of the Army. Instead of existing to provide for the immediate defence of the nation, the Army would maintain itself in a nucleus state with the primary objective becoming that of providing a framework for rapid expansion in case of mobilisation. The institution would retain its organisation, and its subunits, because they would serve as training establishments for the leaders the army would require for expansion. After the start of the depression, when the Army's personnel level declined farther, it would retain as many units as possible, even with absurdly low establishments. Unwittingly, the senior officers' reaction to the threat that the budget cut-backs posed to the organisation would actually increase the similarity between the Australian Army and the Weimar *Reichswehr*. Both forces now operated under nearly identical rationales. The German Army also was a shell, which was also unable to defend the state, and whose primary mission was to prepare for expansion. However, the Germans would manage the task in a much more coherent and focused manner, and as a result, their forces were in a much better position to mobilise as an effective military instrument when rearmament began.

The Army also resisted the government's strategic policy as it also threatened the goal of a seven division organisation. The Senior Officers had selected this figure because they believed it provided the minimum strength necessary to defend the continent from Japanese invasion. The interwar political leaders, however, maintained that invasion was an impossibility because of the protection afforded by the Royal Navy and the naval base at Singapore. Instead of anti-invasion the government wanted military leaders to make anti-raid the focus of their preparations. The Army's leaders remained defiant, and senior officers, such as the Lavarack would wage a campaign of obstruction, even after receiving the direct instructions of the government.[37] In the end, the officers would only barely fulfil the letter of the government's policy. They would eventually concede and create the First Line Component, the force which would have the responsibility of repelling raids. Notionally, the Army would maintain the elements of the First Line Component at a higher level of readiness and establishment than the rest of the force, in order that they could quickly respond to small scale enemy incursions. In reality this did not occur, and units of the First Line Component

differed little from those of the supposed second echelon. In addition, the Army delayed the process for as long as possible by taking more than four years to decide which units would form the First Line Component. Finally, once it had been formed, the Army leaders would make a mockery of the concept, and its purpose, by assigning to it nearly the entire force structure.[38]

Senior officers also confronted the government directly on issues of strategic policy when this threatened the Army's organisation. The most dramatic example was the response of Bruche to Sir Maurice Hankey's report on the Commonwealth's defence requirements and its place within the imperial system. Bruche's tone verged on insubordination and he included unqualified statements that the government's belief in the Singapore Strategy was wrong and improper for the nation's defence. Lavarack, Bruche's successor as CGS, was only slightly less belligerent and his persistent efforts to have the government reconsider its strategic policy earned him a rebuke from the Minister of Defence in 1936.[39]

Although it is necessary to recognise the financial imperatives of the period, the Army leadership's insistence on maintaining an organisation that they could not adequately support meant that other areas of defence preparation had to suffer. As a result of the Army's policies, the standard of militia training and officer education were particularly grave. In 1947 a Member of Parliament, HBS Gullett, could state without exaggeration that 'the standard of the militia in prewar days was so low that on the eve of the war the militia forces could not have undertaken the simplest military operation against a trained force with the least chance of success'.[40] With the limited resources available, maintaining an organisation of seven division required the diversion of limited PMF personnel to the support of an oversized CMF in positions such as Area Officers or as unit adjutants. It might have been more profitable if the Army could have used some of these officers to study developments in the art of war, but such a diversion held little interest for the Army's leaders. Moreover, the Army would put little effort into training, even of the instructors who would be responsible for the teaching of the militia. It opened the Central Training Depot in 1921 for the purpose of training such instructors. The Army closed it the following year and it would not conduct another instructional class until 1935.[41]

Chauvel's Inspector-General Reports throughout the 1920s contain numerous comments on the poor state of training in the Army. Little would change over the following decade. After a 3rd Division camp for leaders' training in 1932 the instructors prepared a damning report which noted the lack of even elementary knowledge by the participating officers. They complained that the standard of regimental training in basic areas such as drill, small arms training and minor tactics was, at best, poor.[42] Standards became so low that the Military Board was compelled to remind commanding officers that only competent officers and NCOS should oversee training.[43] As the end of the interwar neared Lavarack would admit that it 'has been apparent for many years that the standard of training in tactics and staff duties ... should be raised; and that a uniform standard and system of instruction is required'.[44] Not until 1938 would the Army would establish a Command and Staff School to conduct courses of instruction for officers in tactics and staff duties.[45]

Compounding the Army's poor training practices was the policy of allowing unit commanders to set the training objectives for their camps of continuous instruction. Army Headquarters did issue annual training instructions but they did not deal with specifics nor did they provide a coherent doctrinal vision for the army.[46] While limited financial resources meant that the unit camps were all too brief, the level of instruction provided necessarily tended to be basic and repetitious. For example, the syllabus prepared by the 36th Battalion for its camp in 1938 is nearly identical to that provided for the previous year. The Military Board also did not perceive the training cycle as an opportunity to test new ideas on the nature of war. Instead it used the exercises to reinforce existing notions or underwrite its policies. During the late 1930s the Military Board suggested that units conduct their training in coastal areas in order to gain anti-invasion experience. Tactical Exercises Without Troops also frequently followed an anti-invasion theme using a thinly disguised Japan as an opponent.[47]

Unlike the *Reichswehr*, the Australian Army did not have an office which was responsible for establishing uniform training guidelines and objectives. The Army did possess a Directorate of Military Training but its primary purpose was to reissue British training publications and to conduct promotional examinations. During the reorganisation of the Weimar Army, Seeckt made sure to establish, within the *Truppenamt* (the postwar equivalent of the General Staff), sections dedicated to the standardisation of doctrine and training programs. This arrangement also provided the Germans with the means to incorporate the lessons of the war into their doctrine and to evaluate the results of annual training exercises in order to test new theories and incorporate positive results into manuals and future training cycles. The British and Australian Armies lacked an equivalent to the *Truppenamt* and, therefore, they had no device by which to evolve doctrine and training or to seek out advantages in the changing nature of modern war.[48]

The Army's unwillingness to reduce its organisation also meant that it could not be selective in the officers it accepted and it was therefore difficult to attract a better calibre of candidate. Instead, the interwar army was continually handicapped by inferior officer material. The examiner comments accompanying the results of the 1919 entrance exams to RMC suggest a bleak prospect for the Army's future. They noted consistently poor or disappointing results in a variety of subjects. In the exam on general knowledge the marker caustically noted that 'in some cases the ignorance of some matters of every-day knowledge was almost incredible'.[49] The following year the examiners observed that very few candidates had attained an educational standard that could favourably compare to that of the better kind of student who passed the Victorian school leaving examination.[50] During his tenure in 1934, Lavarack also complain of the inadequacy of the incoming cadets which the Army had to accept.[51]

Conclusion

The Australian Army's decline over the course of the interwar period was quite dramatic. In 1918 it was a force which could bend the enemy to its will. In the ensuing years it not only lost that capability but its effectiveness would decline so precipitously that by 1939 the Army was almost completely unprepared for war. On paper the Army contained a large array of formations but they were little more than hollow shells, bereft of manpower, indifferently trained and armed with obsolete weapons. Certainly, the Army's neglect by a series of governments who were unconcerned with military matters was a major contributor to this state of affairs. However, as this paper has shown, the Army's leaders also made decisions which added to the institution's decline and which assured that its forces would be unprepared for modern war. By shifting the focus of the creation of military effectiveness during the interwar from government policy to that of the paths taken by the nation's military leaders, this essay has explored a number of themes which help to explain why the Australian Army was unable to find the way forward.

In contrast to the priority which the *Reichswehr* assigned to the study of war and the intellectual development of its members, the British and Australian officer corps displayed virtually no interest in examining the lessons of the past nor in refining their conception of the nature of modern war. The Australians were neither able to conceive of new ideas for themselves nor to implement innovations suggested by others. Instead they turned to Britain for guidance. Unfortunately the British Army was even more apathetic towards intellectual pursuits than the Australian. This decision to look to Britain was most unfortunate for, as one interwar commentator has noted, the British Army between the wars was like an ostrich that was blinded to the advances in military armament and conception.[52] This action assured that Australia would organise its forces on the basis of obsolete principles whose relevance for modern war remained, deliberately, untested.

It is also puzzling to note that the same Army's leaders, who so strenuously opposed any strategic policy which originated in London, could be so uncritically accepting of tactical and operational concepts originated from the same source. Leaders such as Bruche, Chauvel and Lavarack consistently objected to Australia's national security policy because it was based upon British, not Australian, assumptions regarding imperial strategy. This sense of

nationalism, however, was absent when they considered other areas of military affairs. Australian military leaders willingly employed British manuals as the basis of the Army's preparations and they routinely sent officers to Britain and India and sought advice from the War Office. This practice suggests that the senior officers were not evaluating strategic and tactical/operational policies equally but rather allowed other interests to impede their judgement. The historical record is unclear on the reasons for this, but it is obvious that a larger organisation, one based upon seven divisions, would provide greater opportunity for senior level appointment.

While the accusation that the Army's policies contributed to the impotence of the nation's military forces is serious enough, the role that senior officers played in the misdirection of government policy is even more disturbing. Furthermore, the actions of senior officers have important implications for the definition of military professionalism. The Army's leaders knowingly set priorities and implemented programmes that were in opposition to the desires of the nation's civilian leaders. When given direct instructions on issues to which they objected, senior officers resorted to subterfuge, delay and obstruction in order to make the government reconsider its decision or to minimise the effect of these decisions upon the Army's organisation. Claims that the officers understood the strategic situation more clearly than the politicians are, at best, an inadequate rationale for improper actions. The Army's efforts at undermining the government's preference for a military organised to defend against raids, as opposed to the officers' preference for an anti-invasion function, is an example of patently unacceptable behaviour by an officer corps in a democratic society.

Compounding the error is the fact that the officers' efforts did not succeed in the objective they had set for themselves. The nucleus army was a failure and did not provide the nation with the core of well trained leaders which would facilitate the expansion of the Army. Organisation was a simplistic mantra of leaders who had failed to determine the true lessons of the Great War and who were uninterested in seizing or unable to grasp the opportunity that advances in weaponry offered to reshape the parameters of war. The interwar army failed to realise that organisation is a means to an end and not the objective in itself. The true goal of the Conference of Senior Officers was to provide the nation with an Army that was adequate for its defence. Organisation should have been only one component of the Army's effort to achieve that goal. Von Seeckt, and the leaders of the *Reichswehr* Army, had a much better appreciation of what was required by an officer corps charged with the responsibility of reestablishing an army and laying the foundation for its expansion in time of war.

Institutional memory is an organisation's most precious asset. Throughout the interwar period the Australian Army allowed the experiences and knowledge that it had so painfully acquired during the Great War to dissipate. Exacerbating that tragedy was the leadership's lack of interest in matters which affected the preparation for future war and their obsessional struggle to maintain an organisation at the expense of all other possibilities. The result was an Army which had lost its way and which was incapable of operating at the same level of effectiveness in the Second World War which it had achieved in the First World War. The lesson that must be learned is simple—an army ignores its intellectual preparation at its peril.

Endnotes

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3. The *Reichswehr* did violate some of the terms of Versailles Treaty, such as Germany's arrangement with the Soviet Union regarding armour development. However, these violations were relatively minor and do not explain the great advances the *Reichswehr* made in redeveloping German military strength. See David N Spires, *Image and Reality: The Making of the German Officer, 1921-1933* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 121-3.
4. Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, 'The British Armed Forces, 1918-39', in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (eds), *Military Effectiveness*, vol 2, *The Interwar Period* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 116-17.
5. Harold R Winton, *To Change an Army: General Sir John Burnett-Stuart and British Armored Doctrine 1927-1938* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 128-30; and Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 156-7, 195.
6. BH Liddell Hart, *The Memoirs of Captain Liddell Hart*, Vol 1 (London: Cassell, 1965), 48.
7. Robert Larson, *The British Army and the Theory of Armoured Warfare, 1918-1940* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 234-7, 241; and Williamson Murray, 'Innovation Past and Future', in Williamson Murray and Allan R Millett (eds), *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 323-4.
8. Spires, *Image and Reality*, 126, and Lewis, *Forgotten Legions*, 15.
9. Quoted in James S Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 37.
10. Ibid, 43; and Spires, *Image and Reality*, 126.
11. Murray, 'Innovation Past and Future', 310, 325.
12. General Staff, *Field Service Regulations, Part I: Operations* (London: HMSO, 1909), 11-12; and *Field Service Regulations, Volume II, Operations* (London: HMSO, 1924), 2, 14, 21-2.
13. JFC Fuller, *Lectures on FSR III: (Operations Between Mechanized Forces)* (London: Sifton Praed, 1932), vii.
14. *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1920-21* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1921), 10.
15. Brett Lodge, *Lavarack: Rival General* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 26-8; and *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1933* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1933), 2.
16. *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1932* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1932), 19, and *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1934* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1934), 19.
17. It is clear that even after the outbreak of war the Australian Army continued to rely upon War Office publications. See 'Southern Command Memorandum No 5—Policy Regarding Minor Tactical Training', 1 March 1940, MP70/5, 146/1/2002, Australian Archives, Victoria (hereafter AA Vic].
18. See Claude Neumann, 'Australia's Citizen Soldiers, 1919-1939: A Study of Organization, Command, Recruiting, Training and Equipment', MA (Hons) thesis (UNSW at RMC Duntroon, 1978), 202.
19. An example is the report of an Australian officer in England who was exposed to the British Army's latest thoughts on defensive warfare. See 'Notes on Defence', May 1939, AWM49, 147.
20. 'Lecture Notes for Officer Training, 11th mixed Brigade' (1921), AWM1, 9/15; and 'Tactical Exercise Without Troops—Course for Promotion to Lieut-Col', 19-24 May 1930, AWM1, 17/11A.
21. For the interwar *Reichswehr* debate on armoured warfare see Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg,* 122-43.
22. Lewis, *Forgotten Legions*, 18.
23. Frederick Pile, *Ack-Ack: Britain's Defence Against Air Attack During the Second World War* (London: Harrap, 1949), 28.
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26. 'Mechanical Warfare Committee', 20 August 1931, MP392/10, MSB437/501/76, AA Vic.
27. 'Experimental Mechanization Policy', 15 June 1934, B1535, 849/3/339, AA Vic.
28. 'Military Board Agenda No 42/1933—Appointment of a Director of Mechanization', 3 May 1933, B1535, 859/14/525, AA Vic.
29. 'Mechanical Warfare Committee—Minutes of the First Meeting', 10 September 1931, AWM49, 89; and 'Mechanical Warfare Commitee—Minutes of the Third and Fourth Meetings', 6 October 1932 and 20 April 1933, AWM49, 83. See also, Appendix A to Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the Australian Mechanical Board—Australian Pattern Experimental Armoured Car', in CGS Periodic Letter No 2/1936, A6828/1, 2/1936, Australian Archives, Canberra [hereafter AA Canberra]; 'CGS Periodic Letter No 3/1936', A6828/1, 3/1936, ibid, and 'CGS Periodic Letter No 4/1937', A6828/1, 4/1937, ibid.
30. 'Minute Re: Provision of Personnel in Connection with the Formation of Light Tank Units', 2 February 1937, B1535, 849/20/290, AA Vic.
31. Fuller, *Lectures on FSR III: (Operations Between Mechanized Forces)*, ix-x.

32. The Conference of Senior Officers met in February 1920. Its members were Lieutenant-General CBB White, Lieutenant-General Sir J Monash, Major-General JW McCay, Major-General JG Legge and Major-General JJT Hobbs.
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34. Jeffrey Grey, *Australian Brass: The Career of Lieutenant General Sir Horace Robertson* (Oakleigh, Vic: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 50.
35. 'Infantry Battalions of the Australian Military Forces', August 1936, B1535, 849/3/435, AA Vic.
36. Periodic Letter of the CGS No 3/1935', A682&/1, 3/1935, AA Canberra.
37. 'Council of Defence Agendum: Review of Defence Preparations—The Army', MP726/6, 15/401/59, AA Vic.
38. 'CGS Periodic Letter No 1/1936', A6828/1, 1/1936, Australian Archives, Canberra.
39. Lodge, *Lavarack: Rival General*, 51; 'Memorandum by The Chief of the General Staff on Report on Certain Aspects of Australian Defence by Sir Maurice Hankey', 5 March 1935, Hankey Collection, Australian Defence Force Academy Library— Special Collections, 180391; and 'Reconsideration of Revise of CID Paper 249C: Memo by CGS', 26 June 1935, MP826, 39, AA Vic.
40. *CPD* 193 (1947), 273.
41. AJC Newton, 'The Australian Instructional Corps', *Army Journal* 267 (August 1971): 39.
42. '3rd Division Artillery & infantry Course—Portsea: 3rd Division Headquarters Comments', 11 April 1932; and 'Report on Artillery and Infantry Course—Portsea', 16 March 1932, AWM49, 99.
43. Neumann, 'Australia's Citizen Soldiers', 218.
44. 'CGS Periodic Letter No 2/1938', A6828/1, 2/1938, AA Canberra.
45. Ibid.
46. For an example of an annual training instruction see 'Military Board Instruction', 1 July 1935 in CGS Periodic Letter No 3/1935, A6828/1, 3/1935, AA Canberra.
47. Neumann, 'Australia's Citizen Soldiers', 205-7, and 36th Battalion Tactical Exercises—Camp of Continuous Training (1937 and 1938), AWM1, 17/13 and 17/14.
48. JE Murphy, 'History of the Post-War Army', Australian Defence force Academy Library—Special Collections, 146233; and Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 37-9.
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50. *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1919-20* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1920), 37.
51. *Report on the Royal Military College of Australia for the Year 1934*, 2-3.
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