

# ***THE KOREAN WAR 1950-53: A 50 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE***

## ***INTRODUCTION***

### **Lieutenant General Peter Cosgrove**

Fifty years ago the Cold War briefly became a hot one. On 25 June 1950, seven infantry divisions, an armoured brigade and several independent regiments of the North Korean People's Army crossed the border into the Republic of South Korea to effect the reunification of the divided nation by force. By the usual scale of the wars of the first half of the twentieth century, it was not large: it was by no means a 'world' war. Perhaps it was this small scale that, for a long time, caused the Korean War to be known also as 'the forgotten war'.

It should not have been forgotten, especially in Australia. Apart from the casualties—Australia alone had 339 killed in action and another 1216 wounded—the war was a signal to Australian defence planners that fundamental changes in Australia's strategic outlook had occurred.

Korea reinforced the lesson of the war with Japan that events in Asia demanded as much attention as those in Europe. The understandable desire of many to turn the clock back to the conditions that had existed before the Second World War, best illustrated by the attempts by the former colonial powers to re-establish their empires, failed to recognise the impact of the dramatic changes that had occurred in the world order.

The increasingly active independence movements in Asia provided fertile areas for conflict outside the traditional European flashpoints. The traditional power brokers, Britain, France and Germany, had been replaced by the two superpowers. The United Nations added a new dimension to the resolution of international conflict. Overshadowing all these changes was the growing spectre of the Cold War with its nuclear dimension.

Korea had another lesson for Australia. Despite our cultural and emotional links to Britain and Europe, geographically we were a part of Asia. Events in Asia mattered to Australian security. Korea reinforced the judgements of the post-Second World War planners that we needed the ability to influence affairs in our part of the world. It confirmed the thinking that had led to the formation, in 1948, of permanent military forces in Australia—a dramatic break with the traditional reliance on part time forces.

Unfortunately, it was also a test of the political resolve to follow through these plans. This test we failed. To quote Jeffrey Grey:

It was now that the deficiencies in Australia's post war defence policies showed themselves clearly. There was no ready reaction force available, just one halfstrength battalion in Japan, under-trained, under-equipped and in no way ready for war ... Australia could not put men on the ground when they were needed, in the crucial early days of the war when the South Koreans and Americans were pushed down the Korean peninsula by the armoured weight of the Korean People's Army. It was a poor return for five years of planning.<sup>1</sup>

When Australia did get men on the ground, they acquitted themselves very well. They continued the fine fighting tradition of their fathers and grandfathers.

The lesson we need to reinforce is that poor or inadequate planning usually demands a high cost in soldiers' lives to rectify. The postwar plans were not followed through and it was the poorly-equipped and under-strength 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, that suffered for this neglect. Korea is not the only, or indeed the best, example of such neglect but in this, its fiftieth anniversary, the lesson needs to be retold.

## Endnotes

1. Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2nd rev edn, 1999), 204-5.