

# ***A CENTURY OF SERVICE: 100 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY***

## ***INTRODUCTION***

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In this year, the centenary of the founding of our nation, it is appropriate that we examine the relationship between Australia and the Army that has grown up with it. The Australian Army came into existence on 1 March 1901, thus making it one of the oldest federal institutions, a fact that I suspect is not understood by the broader Australian community. Defence was not as controversial a federation issue as many of the others, but it was one of the main incentives for it to occur. This low profile seems to have set the scene for defence in the public consciousness for the rest of the century.

Defence issues generally are not at the forefront of current community interest, while debates about the Army's role are even more rarely heard. External events can generate brief flurries of interest and activity, but the normal state is for the Army to feature only rarely in the headlines. Yet evidence suggests that the Army is, and has usually been, held in high regard by the Australian people. Traditional Army activities, such as Base open days, Freedom of Cities ceremonies and military tattoos are well patronised. The early years of the century even saw volunteers serving in the Army unpaid, some even providing their own uniforms. While the numbers of citizens volunteering to serve in the militia, CMF, or Army Reserve have fluctuated over the years, there has always been sufficient to ensure that the part time element is a key component of the Army. Clearly, Army retains a special relationship with the Australian community and must work to ensure it is maintained. Community awareness of Army's history and contribution to the nation is an essential ingredient in the retention of this relationship.

The Australian Army has acquired a reputation, both internationally and, perhaps more importantly, domestically, for professionalism of the highest order. Like the community it serves, the Army has experienced challenges, neglect, upheavals and crises: it has not survived unchanged but it has survived. Inevitably, the Army's experience has been shaped by the nation's experiences and by the nation's expectations of it. In its one hundred year existence, the Army has been at war for 32 years and on peace keeping operations akin to war for a further four years. For the rest—the majority of those years—the influences on the Army have been almost entirely domestic: the Government and the community. While we can all understand the impact of war on the Army, the impact of peace can be just as marked.

### **Parallels Between the Nation's history and the Army's History**

The two World Wars and the Vietnam War are the prominent watersheds in Army's history. They also serve as significant milestones in the history of the nation as a whole. The experience of the Army between these events is identifiably different in each period. What is equally interesting is that these years—largely times of peace—feature distinctly different community experiences as well, including different attitudes towards defence and the Army. More recently, Australia's role in leading the operation in East Timor has the potential to be an important milestone in Australian military and political history.

#### *Federation to World War I*

On 1 March 2001, the Australian Army turned one hundred years old. On this date one hundred years ago, control of the various colonial military forces, including permanent soldiers, part time militia and unpaid volunteers was passed from the Colonial authorities to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth inherited a force of 28,886 of whom just 1500 were permanent soldiers. Along with many of its newly acquired functions, the Commonwealth did not inherit any administrative machinery to manage its new forces. Indeed, it was not until

1904 that the *Defence Act*—which provided the legislative base for the administration of the Defence Force—was finally proclaimed. As a consequence, much of the day-to-day administration of the Army had to be left with the existing state authorities for several years.

This administrative confusion was perhaps reflective of the confusion within the rest of the community over what direction defence policy should take. Independence, emerging nationalism and anti-militarism conflicted with the traditions of Imperial loyalty and deference to London on all matters relating to defence and foreign relations. This conflict delayed passage of the *Defence Act* for several years, was a principal cause of the prohibition on the dispatch overseas of Australia's permanent forces and led to the peacetime tradition of defence underfunding.

Public interest in defence matters was generally low until external events occurred, such as the Japanese victory over the Russian fleet at Tsushima in 1905, or rare internal defence issues, such as the move to compulsory military training, arose.

Yet public interest in soldiering—as opposed to engagement with defence issues—was remarkably high, with over 20,000 serving in each year between 1901 and 1914 and quasi-military institutions, such as rifle clubs, flourishing. This was also the period when nearly all Australians subscribed to the myth that we were 'natural' soldiers, with some innate ability that obviated the need for formal military training. The horrific experiences of World War I quickly disabused us of this notion.

### *Between the Wars*

Public attitudes towards the Army after World War I differed markedly from those of the federation period. A combination of war weariness and belief that war would never again occur caused the nation to turn its back on the Army. Immediately on war's end, the Army made plans for a large, peacetime army built around the Militia. It never eventuated. Public apathy and Government cutbacks ensured that recruiting targets were never met, obsolete equipment never replaced and training reduced almost to nothing. All of this was exacerbated by the Great Depression and by muddled strategic thinking. The permanent Army was very poorly treated by Government, individuals being forced to drop back to their substantive rank after the War with little prospect of regaining it. When the Depression bit, the permanent force was arbitrarily sent on leave without pay, the Royal Military College was transferred to Sydney and severely curtailed. All of this occurred with the tacit approval of the Australian community.

One interesting development in this time was the way cost saving drove the strategic assessment process. Government and the community were far too willing to accept proposed solutions to Australia's defence that were based on low cost and promises of British aid. The Australian government chose to ignore Australian Army advice that any Japanese threat was likely to arise when Britain was fully committed in Europe. The three services had to compete for resources, based on these flawed solutions, rather than co-operate to develop an appropriate level of capability. In such an environment, the manpower intensive, and thus expensive, Army was the loser. The consequence was that, when World War II arrived and bore no relation to the solutions that had determined Government policy in the preceding decades, the Army was even less prepared than it had been in 1914.

### *World War II to Vietnam*

The strategic situation confronting Australia in 1946 was markedly different from that in 1919. Australians had been forced to acknowledge geographic reality—that Australia was in Asia. Our international relations had also undergone an upheaval, with the United Kingdom ceasing to be the focus of our foreign and defence policies: although initially at least, many of our military operations were in support of British forces in current or former colonies. These dramatic changes were mirrored by changes in the Army. For the first time, the nation accepted the need to establish and maintain a standing army.

As Australia began to participate more independently in world affairs, the requirements on the Army began to change as well. The need to fight conventional wars remained but the reality was that the Army needed to develop new skills to deal with insurgency movements and low intensity wars of liberation. The Army had to operate in environments in which the actions of platoon leaders had political and international consequences, such as in the Claret operations in Borneo during Confrontation.

It was in this period the Army, for the first time in its history, found itself the target of much hostility and opposition. Many in the community seemed unable to distinguish between government policy and the instrument for implementing that policy. The Army bore much public opprobrium for the unpopularity of the selective national service system and for the war in Vietnam. In the divisive anti-conscription debates of 1966 and 1967, conscription was recognised as a political issue and the public did not hold the Army to account for it. After the 1960s, it took many years to repair the relationship with the community, indeed there remains a strong anti-military sentiment in some parts of contemporary Australian society that has its roots in these troubled years.

### *Vietnam to East Timor*

The end of the Vietnam War ushered in the longest continuous period of peace in the nation's, and thus the Army's, history. This provided the opportunity for much of the Vietnam bitterness to wash out of society. It also provided the longest single period for changing societal values to impact on the Army. The last decade especially has seen dramatic change in traditional Army culture, with women occupying mainstream functional and command positions, and deliberate attempts being made to widen the ethnic composition of the force. Much attention has been given to establishing standards of conduct and operation that reflect current community expectations.

Like the community, the Army has had to deal with the rapid advances in technology over the last decade. While the basic function of our infantry remains the destruction of the enemy and the seizing of ground, the range of new resources the soldier has available to help him achieve this has multiplied enormously. From sophisticated optical sights on his personal weapon to highly capable command and control systems that provide him with all the information he needs, technology has once again revolutionised the battlefield. Like the community, the Army is likely to get little respite from the constant upheavals of technological change.

### *East Timor and Beyond*

The experience of East Timor has been a major event in the Army's history. It was a test of our ability to operate effectively in our immediate geographic region, lead a multinational force and operate at the three levels of military engagement, the strategic, the operational and the tactical level. Historically, Australia has fought as a junior partner in the armies of our large allies, first Britain, then the United States, and finally the United Nations. In East Timor, Australia was required to play this lead role. It was a new experience for the nation as well—international relations being directly affected by Australian decisions and actions alone. Whether this will have any ongoing impact on the community or the Army, only the coming century will reveal.