

by
Roger Lee, Army Historian

One issue that continues to interest military historians, both professional and amateur alike, is the debate over the Army's correct 'birthday'. As far as the Army is concerned, there is no confusion. On the 1st of March 2001, the Australian Army celebrated its one hundredth birthday with nation wide celebrations, including a major parade in the Nation's capital. However, the acceptance of 1901 as the birthday year is not without controversy. A number of competing years have been suggested, each of which has some merit. This article will examine the various dates put forward as the Army's 'true' birthday and explain why 1st March 1901 is the accepted one.

The dates most usually proposed as alternatives to 1901 are 1902, 1903 and 1904. These other years relate to significant political and administrative occurrences such as the arrival of the first General Officer Commanding the Australian Army, the passage of the Defence Bill through Parliament and the proclamation of the Defence Act. There are three reasons 1901 is accepted as the proper year from which to date the Australian Army. These are summarised as follows and addressed in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs:

- a. Authorisation for the formation of the Commonwealth Military Forces was decreed on 1 March 1901 (Commonwealth Gazette No. 9 of 20 February 1901) in accordance with the terms of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. This decree covered both the Permanent Forces as well as State Militia formations and was the formal instrument for the proposed changes, despite the fact that a date for the actual "Conversion, Disbandment and Reorganisation" was still subject to the passage of the legislation and did not eventuate until 1st July 1903;
- b. The eight Battalions of the Australian Commonwealth Horse raised for service in South Africa were formed under the authority of the Commonwealth Government in accordance with the Constitution and not independently by individual states, nor through public subscription.
- c. Even before the 1 March 1901 gazettal, elements of the various colonial Permanent Forces, mainly

Attested Permanent Royal Australian Artillery (RAA) personnel, had already been formed into a single Permanent Force. This process, which began in 1899, was largely completed prior to federation. As a result, the RAA became the first Commonwealth institution in existence, preceding even the Parliament of the Commonwealth. Thus the Commonwealth Military Forces, by the 1st of March 1901, already had a permanent Australian Regiment on establishment.

Both prior to, and after, the appointment of Major General Sir Edward Hutton as Commander Commonwealth Forces (effective 28 January 1902), District Commandants had begun work towards the formation of the Commonwealth Military Forces. On a scale unprecedented in this country the assembled Federal Military Committee addressed a kaleidoscope of issues which had the potential to be a major political disaster if not handled correctly. (The Federal Military Committee, a gathering of the various Colonial Military Commandants and politicians, had been meeting since 1894 to achieve co-ordination in military affairs.) The scale of the task is set out clearly in the Commonwealth Gazettes of the period. The Committee process was both time consuming and meticulous and, understandably, took some time to translate into legislation acceptable to all vested interests. However, until the process was complete a date of effect could not be determined. Interim orders, such as General Order No102 of 4 July 1902, were issued. Interim Orders were used to allow Military Districts to put into effect administrative changes prior to the passing of the enabling Defence Act.

As a result of Imperial pressure to furnish further contingents to South Africa, the Imperial Drafts were raised early in 1901. The Constitution states (Sec. 114.) that 'a State shall not, without the consent of the Parliament of the Commonwealth, raise or maintain any naval or military force ...'. The new Commonwealth, however, clearly lacked the machinery to raise the forces required. The Premiers, present at Commonwealth celebrations in Sydney, agreed that the Commonwealth should authorise the States to raise the Imperial Drafts. From late 1901 the Imperial Government requested further reinforcements and progressively eight battalions of light horse, known as the Australian Commonwealth Horse (ACH) were raised. The Commonwealth Government became formally

responsible for the raising and dispatch of these new operational units. Indisputably, they were the first 'Australian' troops to embark on operations against an enemy.

While the companies were raised on a state basis (as were the battalions of the AIF in 1914), ACH regimental staffs were in most cases soldiers drawn from different states. The Battalions wore one uniform, one badge (the 'rising sun') and had one title: "Australian Commonwealth Horse". In February 1902 the Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, said to the men of the 1st and 2nd Battalions ACH: "For the first time... the Commonwealth of Australia, as a new nation, sends forth a body of soldiers to take part in the conflict in which the Empire is engaged".

On 14 July 1899, Queen Victoria signed a document that created the Royal Australian Artillery (RAA). With an effective date of 24 August 1899 the first Australian Regiment was raised. As a direct result of this pre-federation development, the Permanent Artillery of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland amalgamated to become the first federal institution. On 1 July 1902, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania were also taken on strength of the RAA, thus completing the unification of the Permanent State Batteries. In General Order No. 101 of 4 July 1902 (Gazette No. 44, 12 September 1902), the remaining State Regiments of the RAA were discontinued by either disbandment or unification within the RAA, under a new designated formation title. Lateral postings between units of the RAA began in 1902 with the postings of three former "A" Battery officers interstate. A school of gunnery was also established, with courses being attended by all members of the RAA. General Order No.1 of 9 January 1903 ordered "A" Battery to become "A" Instructional Cadre to further assist with the training of the RAA, all prior to 1 July 1903.

The debate largely comes down to issues of intent, responsibility and accountability. The arguments in support of 1903 or 1904 as the correct year are based on the delay in the political process: i.e. passage of the Defence Bill and the formulation of its associated regulations. A number of intended changes in the defence structure and arrangements were not finalised until mid 1903 or assented to until 1904. In many ways, however, the actions in 1903 could be viewed as a further administrative change rather than a new one. The Commonwealth

took control of the Defence Forces in 1901. In 1903, it completed a period of transitional arrangements for which it had held and exercised the responsibility since 1901. Other changes soon followed, with another upheaval of the Military Forces in 1912 and again immediately after the First World War. In many ways, 1903 (or 1904 in a strict administrative or legal sense) could be seen as just the first of the many administrative changes and rearrangements that have characterised the history of the Army throughout its existence.