

***THE SECOND FIFTY YEARS:
THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY 1947-1997***

***FROM KOREA TO PENTROPIC:
THE ARMY IN THE 1950s AND EARLY 1960s***

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The period of 15 years from 1950 to 1965 was crucial to the shaping of the Australian Army as we know it today. In 1950 the Army was only in embryonic state. By the beginning of 1965, after a number of changes, a new army was taking shape which was not substantially different in its order of battle from the one still in existence until only a few years ago. Much of the equipment being purchased in 1965 was only replaced in the last few years, and some is still in use. During those 15 years the ethos and traditions of the new regular army were established. And most importantly, the balance between the regular and citizen components of the army was changed, perhaps irrevocably.

The period of 15 years was also a period of consistency and consolidation. Australia not only had the same government throughout the entire period, but even the same Prime Minister—Robert Menzies. In this era of 'forward defence', defence and foreign policy changed only slowly. For most of the time defence expenditure was severely curtailed, with a substantial increase occurring only in 1964. Throughout the entire period Australia had one or more of its regular infantry battalions serving overseas, and for most of the time the Army had only three regular battalions. Throughout the period Australia had only one regular armoured corps regiment.

Our understanding of this period is hampered by a lack of scholarly studies of the Australian Army as an institution. Many people would probably know that from 1950 to 1953 Australian Army units fought in the Korean War. They would probably also know that an Australian infantry battalion served in Malaya, fighting in the emergency and later in confrontation. They probably know that for some years there was an unusual Pentropic organisation, and also that there was some form of National Service. The difficulty is comprehending how these developments and activities fitted together. In this paper I am going to tackle this problem by considering six major topics. These are:

- the effect of the Korean War;
- the role of the Citizen Military Forces and National Service;
- the commitment to Malaya;
- the formation of the Regular brigade group;
- the Pentropic experiment;
- the end of the Pentropic organisation.

The Effect of the Korean War

In the previous paper Graeme Sligo described the formation of the Australian Regular Army and its development up to the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. As he wrote, at that time Australia had one regular battalion, 3RAR, in Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. That battalion was deployed to Korea in September 1950, and by mid-October as part of the British 27th Brigade was in action north of Seoul. The battalion played a significant part in the advance to the Chinese border and also in the withdrawal and the defence at Kapyong in April 1951.

In April 1952 the Australian Army contribution in Korea was expanded from one to two battalions and 3RAR was joined by 1RAR. Since the Australians now comprised the majority of the troops in the 28th Brigade (the Australians had since moved from the 27th Brigade), command passed to an Australian officer, Brigadier Thomas Daly. A year later he was succeeded by Brigadier John Wilton and 1RAR was replaced by 2RAR.¹

The Korean War was significant for the development of the Australian Army in a number of ways. It was the first war fought by the Regular Army, even though the Army was short of manpower and volunteers had to be specially enlisted to make up the numbers. Initially most of the officers had considerable operational experience from the Second World War, but soon the new graduates from Duntroon began to join the battalion. The Duntroon classes of 1946, 1947 and 1948 were the first postwar classes after the shorter wartime courses were expanded to a three-year course. In Korea both the officers and soldiers gained valuable experience which was to stand Australia in good stead for the next 20 years.

Maintaining the two battalions imposed a tremendous strain on the Australian Army, particularly in the provision of junior officers, and officers from Armoured, Artillery, Engineers and Signals Corps were posted to battalions for service in the anti-tank, mortar, assault pioneer and signals platoons. Artillery officers also served with British or New Zealand artillery units.

The Korean War caused a rethink in Australian Army doctrine. The Australians who went to Korea were well trained for jungle warfare. In Korea they were involved in a conventional war in mountainous terrain and in a temperate, at times cold, climate. They had to cooperate with US armoured formations, movement was often by motor vehicle, artillery support was provided by divisional artillery and air support was available. Once the war became static in late 1951 it had many of the characteristics of the trench warfare of the First World War. This is not to suggest that the Australians were completely out of their depth in a tactical sense. The skills of patrolling, as shown at both Tobruk and in the Pacific War, were extremely valuable. And the techniques of battalion defensive and offensive operations, developed in the Pacific War, were still relevant. In general, however, Australian Army doctrine in the mid 1950s was based around the expectation that operations would be conventional and on a divisional or brigade scale.²

The Korean War established the ethos of the new Regular Army. Since many of the officers and soldiers had come from the AIF of the Second World War they brought with them the AIF traditions. They felt part of the same Army that had begun at Gallipoli, won acclaim in the First World War and had continued that tradition of service in the Second World War at Tobruk, El Alamein, Kokoda, Finschhafen and Borneo. It was a tradition built around the idea that the Army consisted of citizen soldiers in uniform for as long as it took to deal with the nation's enemies.

But most of the officers and many of the men involved in the Occupation Force and in Korea had decided to make the Army their career. They were available for any task which the government of the day decreed, whether it be garrison duties, strike-breaking (however distasteful that might be) or, as in Korea, a full-scale war. They quickly learned that it was a far cry from the world wars when they were supported by almost the entire nation. Now they were largely out of sight and out of mind in a lonely war. As in the AIF, they relied on mateship, but they also learned to draw their strength from professionalism—from a pride in achievement. Their ethos was aptly summed up in the motto of the Royal Australian Regiment—'Duty First'. And soon the Regular Army had its own battle honours—Sariwon, Yongyu, Chongui, Pakchon, Uijongbu, Chuam-ni, Maewa-San, Kapyong, Kowang-San (which includes Maryang-San) and the Samichon. The new Regular Army had established a reputation for bravery, dash in the offensive, dogged persistence in defence, and consideration for its wounded.

When the armistice was signed in July 1953 the battalions did not return home immediately, and when 3RAR eventually returned home in November 1954 it had had four years' continuous service in Korea. Since the battalion had been formed (as the 67th Battalion in 1945), it had never served in Australia. In April 1954 1RAR relieved 2RAR in Korea, and it did not return to Australia until March 1956.

The Roles of the Citizen Military Forces and National Service

The formation of the Australian Regular Army in 1947 is usually seen as a major turning point in Australian defence policy, but it was not quite the turning point that some people imagined. After all, at the same time the government authorised the formation of the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) with quite an ambitious order of battle. This was, in many respects, a continuation of Australia's approach, entrenched by the 1903 *Defence Act*, of basing its defence on part-time soldiers. Initially the CMF had considerable advantages. Its senior and middle rank officers had combat experience from the Second World War and many had commanded similar units and formations on operations. They also had considerable political influence, often filling senior civilian positions. There was plentiful equipment left over from the war, and units carried on the traditions of the 2nd and indeed the 1st AIF.

But there were also disadvantages. After six years of war most returned servicemen were interested in re-establishing civilian careers. By 31 December 1948 the CMF strength stood at only 17,025 against its target of 50,000. At the same time the ARA was 4500 men short of its target of 19,000.³ As each year passed it became less likely that recruits would have war-time experience.

The Liberal-Country Party Coalition, which came to power under Robert Menzies in December 1949, followed through on its promise to introduce National Service. When the Cabinet approved the introduction of a National Service scheme in July 1950 it envisaged an annual intake of 10,000, but later in the year this was increased to 15,000 and later again to 29,250. Trainees received 98 days full-time training and were then posted to CMF units for three years, where they continued to serve for 42 days per year, consisting of a 14-day camp, 14 days compulsory home training and 14 days optional home training.

As the National Servicemen were not required to serve overseas, it is difficult to see how they contributed to the stated defence aim of being able to cooperate with British Commonwealth plans. Nevertheless, it was the government's intention that the CMF should be prepared to become an expeditionary force should war break out.⁴ In 1950, shortly before the outbreak of the Korean War, Britain had sought Australian assistance to combat the Communist terrorists in Malaya, and Australia had agreed to send a squadron of Lincolns and another of Dakotas. Although Australia decided not to send combat troops to Malaya, Britain wanted Australia to plan on deploying several divisions to the Middle East in time of war. The CMF field force was to form the basis of this expeditionary force if it became necessary to send one.

The government clearly took the threat of global war seriously. Menzies said in parliament in March 1951 that 'the state of the world is such that we cannot, and must not, give ourselves more than three years in which to get ready to defend ourselves. Indeed, three years is a liberal estimate'.⁵ A number of defence initiatives were announced, including the establishment of a National Security and Resources Board, the formation of the Pacific Islands Regiment and plans to purchase equipment for the Navy and Air Force. There was also a plan to increase the Regular Army from one to two brigades, but this never eventuated.

By the end of 1953 the CMF comprised 70,000 national servicemen and 14,000 volunteer enlistees, and this allowed for an increase in the field force order of battle.⁶ In each of 1954, 1955 and 1956 the CMF strength was over 80,000.⁷ As at 1 April 1953 the organisation of the Australian Army (showing brigadier commands and higher) was as shown on the following page. (An AGRA was an Army Group Royal Artillery, and was a group of artillery regiments.)

It should be noted that there is no Regular Army infantry brigade. When the ARA had been formed in 1947 it was intended to form a brigade and for a while the Director of Infantry was actually nominated as its commander, but the brigade was not formed properly. With the outbreak of the Korean War the ARA was flat out sustaining the force in Korea and it was not possible to continue with plans to form the brigade. Plans to form a second brigade were abandoned. Although the regular forces were limited, there were some 32 CMF battalions, not counting the university regiments. In those days an infantry brigade had three infantry battalions.

Although there were two armoured brigades there was only one under-strength Regular Army armoured regiment. There were four CMF armoured regiments, three armoured car regiments, a cavalry regiment, a reconnaissance regiment, an armoured personnel carrier regiment, a motor regiment and an amphibious assault regiment. Equipment included Centurion tanks for the regular unit plus a CMF squadron, M3 Grant tanks, Staghound and later Saladin armoured cars, Canadian and Ferret scout cars, Saracen and White armoured personnel carriers, and machine-gun carriers.⁸

There was one Regular Army field regiment and also a restricted coast regiment, but there were 27 CMF artillery regiments of all types—ten of these were anti-aircraft regiments. Although the artillery was mainly equipped with Second World War 25 pounders and 3.7 inch and 40 mm Bofors AA guns it received some new equipment. Between 1950 and 1956 the Army took delivery of 170 120-mm anti-tank guns, 12 5.5-inch medium guns, 36 conversion kits for 40 - mm LAA guns and 89 4.2-inch mortars.

In general, however, the Army was still relying on much of the equipment left over from the Second World War and new equipment was usually purchased from Britain.

Army Headquarters

CGS Lt-Gen Sir Sydney Rowell
RMC Duntroon Maj-Gen RNL Hopkins
Aust Staff College Brig IR Campbell

Northern Command Maj-Gen VC Secombe

11 Infantry Brigade Brig JEG Martin
7 Infantry Brigade Brig RF Monaghan
5 AGRA (Field) Brig CH Wilson

Eastern Command Lt-Gen Sir Frank Berryman

1 Armoured Brigade Brig D Macarthur-Onslow

2nd Division Maj-Gen Gen IN Dougherty

HQ RAA Brig CE Chapman
1 AGRA (AA) Brig PW Kelso
5 Infantry Brigade Brig JA Bishop
8 Infantry Brigade Brig GS Cox
14 Infantry Brigade Brig JW Main
2 NS Training Brigade Brig TN Gooch

Southern Command Lt-Gen Sir Horace Robertson

2 Armoured Brigade Brig HH Hammer

3rd Division Maj-Gen RJH Risson

HQ RAA Brig WH Hall
2 AGRA (Fd) Brig AE Arthur
4 AGRA (AA) Brig RM Ford
4 Infantry Brigade Brig RR Gordon
6 Infantry Brigade Brig NW Simpson

Central Command Maj-Gen R King

C Comd Group Brig TC Eastick
9 Infantry Brigade Brig JG McKinna

Western Command Maj-Gen R Bierwirth

13 Infantry Brigade Brig AW Buttrose

Tasmania Command Brig GEW Hurley

Northern Territory Command Lt-Col KE Wheeler

HQ British Commonwealth Forces, Korea Lt-Gen H Wells

28 Brit Comm Infantry Brigade Brig JGN Wilton

The Commitment to Malaya

By the mid-1950s the strategic situation, which had driven the idea of a large citizen force ready to defend Australia or, even more improbably, to be deployed to the Middle East, had changed. A global war between the Soviet Bloc and the Western Alliance no longer seemed likely. But the communist victory in North Vietnam in 1954, closely following the armistice in Korea, seemed to offer Communist China the opportunity for further aggression in southeast Asia. As a response, in September 1954 Australia signed the South East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, soon to be known by the organisation it set up—SEATO.

Meanwhile, Britain had been exploring the idea of forming a Far East strategic reserve, and in January 1955 the Commonwealth Prime Ministers agreed to form such a reserve. As part of its contribution, the Australian government deployed 2RAR and supporting elements to Malaya in October 1955. Although it was there ostensibly to form part of the reserve if Communist China advanced into Thailand, in reality 2RAR spent almost all of its effort in counter-insurgency tasks against the Communist Terrorists. The Malayan Emergency had been under way since 1948 and by the time 2RAR arrived the British security forces had the situation well under control. The Australian battalion, which was relieved by 3RAR in 1957 and by 1RAR in 1959, could play only a minor role in the overall security campaign.⁹

Like Korea, the Malaya commitment was significant in the Army's development. The first development concerned doctrine. The wartime Jungle Training Centre at Canungra in southern Queensland had closed down, but was reopened early in 1955 to develop jungle training and doctrine.¹⁰ Before deployment to Malaya the companies of 2RAR had to pass through JTC. Once the troops arrived in Malaya they were given further training by British instructors. In addition to jungle training the Australian Army had to learn the particular techniques of counter-insurgency warfare, and their bible became the British manual, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, commonly referred to as the ATOM pamphlet.

The operations in Malaya demanded a high level of skill in jungle warfare, good leadership from junior commanders and perseverance. The Australians learned much from the British Army and the Australian troops there further developed the professionalism that had started in Korea.

By this time the numbers of former AIF officers had started to decline and there were many more Duntroon graduates in command appointments. Also, by this time a new category of officer had arrived. The Officer Cadet School had been opened at Portsea in January 1952, partly to provide junior officers for the National Service Training Scheme.¹¹ By the mid 1950s these officers were starting to appear in the regular battalions and other units. They graduated as second lieutenants and had to serve three years before promotion to lieutenant. An example from the first class at Portsea was Second Lieutenant Ian Hands whose first posting was to the 15th National Service Training Battalion but who served with 2RAR in Malaya. He commanded a company of 3RAR in Vietnam in 1968. Of the 61 graduates of mid 1952, 40 went straight to one of the nine National Service Training Battalions or the 1st Recruit Training Battalion.

The battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment were affected by the long commitments to Korea and Malaya more than the other corps, but as it was largely an infantry Army the effect permeated much of the Army.¹² Although battalions were located at Ingelburn and Enoggera, they did not remain there very long. If any of the battalions had been based in one area of Australia for an extended period, especially early in their history, they might have begun to look upon themselves as, say, Victorian or Queensland battalions. The result of this constant movement was, however, that soldiers truly felt themselves to be part of an Australian regiment—representative of the nation as a whole. To the soldiers and their families, the Regiment, or more specifically the battalion, was their home. But there was a down side. The Army needed to establish links with the civilian community, for without a base the troops could become isolated from the Australian people.

The Formation of a Regular Army Brigade Group

While service in Malaya provided useful operational experience, the Army realised that if it were to have forces available for deployment at short notice to southeast Asia as part of a SEATO force it was necessary to review its structure. The National Service scheme had imposed a tremendous strain on the Army. It had been difficult to raise 2RAR to full strength for its commitment to Malaya, and more troops were employed in training National Servicemen that were available for the Australian-based combat force. In 1956 staff studies in Army Headquarters concluded that to meet possible commitments to a SEATO force in the event of communist aggression the minimum requirement would be a 'mobile, hard-hitting' regular brigade group in addition to the battalion group with the Strategic Reserve in Malaya.

On 4 April 1957, in a major review of defence policy, the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, stated that owing to the nuclear deterrent the threat of global war was now considered unlikely. In view of communist efforts at expansion, however, limited war could occur in the neighbouring region at any time, and Australia shared a responsibility to prevent the occurrence of such outbreaks. 'In the upshot, speed and a capacity to hit [would] determine victory', and it was therefore necessary to have highly trained, effective and compact units available for immediate employment. The National Service scheme was to be modified and the annual intake reduced, thus enabling the Army to raise a Regular field force of a brigade group. In the event of a global war 'it would be manifestly difficult for the United Kingdom to maintain a line of supply to South-East Asia', and hence, as far as possible, Australia should standardise equipment with the Americans.¹³

Details of the new infantry brigade were announced by the Minister for the Army, John Cramer, in September, when he said that it was 'designed to produce the best balance [of capabilities] for possible operations in the varied terrain of the South-East Asian area'. The new 1st Infantry Brigade Group was to consist of two infantry battalions (1RAR and 3RAR), the 1st Armoured Regiment, the 1st Field Regiment, a field engineer squadron, a Special Air Service (SAS) company, and elements of signals, supply, transport, medical, ordnance and workshops units.¹⁴ With its headquarters at Holsworthy, near Sydney, it was to be commanded by Brigadier John (Hans) Andersen, a former commanding officer of the 1st Field Regiment.

The first brigade exercise, called a brigade concentration, was held in February 1958 at Holsworthy and at Kangaroo Valley, south of Sydney. The 1959 brigade exercise—Exercise GRANDSLAM in the Mackay area of Queensland—was the first major regular brigade exercise conducted in Australia since the Second World War.

A new unit to come out of the formation of the 1st Brigade was the Special Air Service Company, which was located at Swanbourne, near Perth. British experience in Malaya had shown the value of the SAS.

The formation of the brigade had also required the 1st Field Artillery Regiment to be brought to full strength, and an independent LAA battery was formed. With the expansion of the Regular field artillery there was a decrease in CMF artillery units. In 1957 the order of battle was reduced by two AGRAs and by one heavy, one medium, two field, two light, two LAA and four HAA regiments.¹⁵ In June 1959, the 1st AGRA (AA) in Eastern Command, was disbanded and the headquarters of RAA 1st Corps was formed to command the New South Wales anti-aircraft units.¹⁶ At the same time as the formation of the new brigade, the government announced the purchase of the 105-mm M2A2 howitzer from the United States, eventually to replace the trusty 25-pounder. It was a major step along the way towards providing the Army with US rather than British equipment.

The new brigade still had its limitations. It lacked its third battalion and little provision had been made for logistic support as the planners assumed this would be provided by Australia's allies. In March 1958 the CGS, Lieutenant-General Sir Ragnar Garrett, explained to the government that the brigade could only be deployed at short notice if the CMF were partly mobilised, but the CMF had no obligation to serve overseas.¹⁷

By 1959 there had been a major shift in Australia's approach to defence. For the past decade the CMF had been seen as the backbone of Australian land defence. But with the formation of the 1st Brigade and the reduction of the CMF in 1957 the emphasis had changed to the ARA. This shift in policy was made more explicit in June 1959 when the Chiefs of Staff argued that 'the primary emphasis must henceforth be placed on the Regular Army itself, its secondary task being to train and administer a CMF to support it if necessary'.¹⁸ This was the reverse of what had been the case until 1959 and I consider it to be one of the major turning points in the development of the Australian Army.

These developments were not lost on the CMF which made a last gasp attempt to retain its influence. At the end of Garrett's tenure as CGS the Minister for the Army, Cramer recommended that he be succeeded by Major-General Ivan Dougherty, a distinguished CMF officer then on the Reserve of Officers.¹⁹ Dougherty had served with distinction in Libya, Greece, Crete, New Guinea and Borneo and had commanded the 21st Brigade in three campaigns. Since then he had commanded a CMF brigade and the 2nd Division and had been CMF member of the Military Board from 1954 to 1957. The Minister for Defence, Athol Townley, over-ruled Cramer and a regular officer, Lieutenant-General Reginald Pollard, became CGS in mid 1960.

In its secret strategic review the government considered that Australia should be prepared for involvement in limited war in southeast Asia, and that its forces should have 'as far as possible the necessary organisation and techniques to operate effectively with major allies'.²⁰ With this assessment in mind, in November 1959 Townley announced the abolition of National Service, a 50 per cent increase in the volunteer strength of the CMF and a 35 per cent increase in the strength of the ARA brigade group. He also foreshadowed the introduction of the Pentropic organisation which army planners were in the process of finalising and preparing for promulgation.

The Pentropic Experiment

The introduction of the new Pentropic organisation was formally announced in March 1960. This decision had its origin in a number of factors.²¹ Firstly, it was designed to provide a 'lean, powerful, versatile organisation, readily adaptable to any type of operation in which it is likely to be involved in South-East Asia'.²² Secondly, in the late 1950s Britain was developing the concept of mechanised brigade groups to replace the standard infantry division, while the Americans had turned to a pentagonal structure known as the 'pentomic' organisation. Australia had to decide whether to copy the British or the Americans, or go its own way, and chose an organisation that would be compatible with the Americans.²³ Thirdly, it has been claimed that the new organisation gave the CGS an opportunity to gain more funds for the Army. And finally, many senior CMF officers believed that the new organisation was introduced by senior Regular officers to reduce the capability and influence of the CMF.²⁴

Under the Pentropic organisation the Army was to consist of two divisions, the 1st and the 3rd, while the headquarters of the existing 2nd Division was to be converted to the headquarters of the Communications Zone. A standard Pentropic division had no brigades, but was to consist of an armoured regiment, five large infantry battalions, an artillery headquarters with five field artillery regiments, a field engineer regiment, a light aviation company, a signals regiment and support services. The new battalions had an establishment of 1300 men compared with the old battalions of about 800, and each was commanded by a colonel with a lieutenant-colonel executive officer. Within each battalion there were five rifle companies each with four platoons and a weapons platoon. Each platoon had four sections.

The idea was that a field artillery regiment, an engineer squadron and other combat and service elements could be placed in support of an infantry battalion to form a powerful battle group numbering about 1800 men. For higher level operations several battle groups could be placed under the command of a task force headquarters, of which there was only one in the division. The new division, with a strength of 14,000 personnel, had more firepower than the previous jungle division with its 15,000.

To implement this plan, the 1st Brigade was disbanded and the 1st Division was formed with a regular commander—Major-General Ian Murdoch. He was a Duntroon graduate who had had a number of armoured corps and staff appointments during the war. It was Australia's first Regular Army divisional headquarters. The division had two regular Pentropic battalions, 2RAR at Holsworthy and 3RAR at Enoggera, which had been formed by expanding the old standard battalions. The division's remaining Pentropic battalions were CMF units—two in Sydney and one in Brisbane. The 3rd Division, based in Victoria, comprised five CMF Pentropic battalions—two in Melbourne and one each in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.

This reorganisation had a devastating effect on the CMF infantry battalions: of the 31 standard infantry battalions and nine brigade headquarters only 17 battalions and six brigade headquarters were left intact. Later all the brigade headquarters were disbanded and the remaining battalions were reduced to eight and reconstituted as Pentropic battalions, organised into state regiments bearing the 'Royal' prefix. These regiments replaced virtually all the old infantry regiments that had existed since the introduction of the Kitchener scheme in 1911. The CMF battalions lost their battalion numbers, their battle honours and their connection to the old AIF. In South Australia, for example, the 9th Brigade headquarters and the 10th, 27th and 43rd/48th Battalions became the 1st Battalion, The Royal South Australian Regiment. There was a similar effect on the CMF artillery units: of the 17, seven were either disbanded or absorbed into other regiments.²⁵ As a result of the cessation of National Service and the introduction of the Pentropic establishment the CMF lost 24 brigadier positions. It is true that a number of Regular Army generals were compulsorily retired, but that was to clear blockages for promotion rather than as part of a widespread reduction in senior positions. In some cases the CMF pentropic battalions were commanded by Regular colonels. The order of battle in 1962, showing pentropic battalions, was as following.

Army Headquarters

CGS, Lt-Gen Sir Reginald Pollard
RMC Duntroon, Maj-Gen CH Finlay
Australian Staff College, Brig CE Long
Army Schools

Northern Command, Maj-Gen MF Brogan

3RAR, Col WJ Morrow
1RQR, Col RWB Dodd
2RQR, Col IM Hunter

Eastern Command, Lt-Gen HG Edgar

1st Division, Maj-Gen IT Murdoch
HQ RAA, Brig FR Evans
1RAR, Col CMI Pearson
2RNSWR, Col PH Pike
3RNSWR, Brig JM McCarty
Comm Z, Maj-Gen PA Cullen

Southern Command, Maj-Gen LG Canet

3 Division, Maj-Gen RR Gordon
HQ RAA, Brig JA North
1RVR, Col GR Warfe
2RVR, Col SH Buckler

Central Command, Brig WW Wearne

1 RSAR, Brig RL Johnson

Western Command, Brig GP Hunt

1RWAR, Col JB Roberts

Tasmania Command

1RTR, Col CAE Fraser

Northern Territory Command
AAF FARELF, Brig D Vincent
28 Comwel Bde, Brig FG Hassett

During the early 1960s the new regular battalions conducted a series of major exercises to learn how best to use the Pentropic organisation. These exercises, however, had another benefit. They provided extensive training for junior officers, NCOs and soldiers that would stand the Army in good stead in the Vietnam War. But there was a disconnect between organisation and doctrine. Although the organisation was more suited to conventional open warfare, the training was directed towards counter-insurgency.

Between 1960 and 1964 the Army either received or ordered most of the equipment with which it fought in the Vietnam War and which has only recently been replaced. Indeed some equipment is still in use. For example, the Army received the FN rifle, the M60 GPMG, the 105mm pack howitzer, the 106mm recoilless rifle, the new 81mm mortar, the AN/PRC25 radio and the M113 armoured personnel carrier. The M113 was the first substantial purchase of new armoured vehicles since the Centurion and was designed to give the infantry increased mobility. Also the RAAF began to receive Iroquois utility helicopters. It is noticeable that most of this equipment came from the United States.

The End of the Pentropic Organisation

Throughout the period of the Pentropic experiment the Australian Army maintained an infantry battalion and a field battery with the 28th Commonwealth Brigade at Terendak in Malaya, and these units were organised on the standard British establishment. Each time a battalion was sent to Malaya it had to change from the Pentropic to the tropical establishment, causing unnecessary turmoil and disruption to unit cohesion. In an attempt to alleviate this problem, in early 1964 a new regular battalion, 4RAR, was formed at Woodside in South Australia. It was destined to relieve 3RAR in Malaya in early 1966.

By mid-1964 the strategic environment had changed substantially in the four years since the Pentropic organisation had been introduced. Initially, it was thought that the greatest danger to regional stability would come in Laos, where there was a civil war between Communist and non-Communist forces, but soon this danger was overshadowed by events in Vietnam. In 1962 the Australian Army sent the first members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese Army, then under pressure from Communist guerillas known as the Viet Cong.

Australia acquiesced in Indonesia's take-over of Dutch New Guinea. By 1962 President Sukarno of Indonesia was opposing the plan to form a new state of Malaysia to include Malaya, Singapore and the British possessions in Borneo. At the end of 1962 British troops put down a rebellion in Brunei, and then in 1963 Indonesia began to send so-called volunteers across the border from Kalimantan into Sarawak and Sabah (North Borneo) to stir up trouble. After Malaysia was formed in September 1963, to include all the former British territories except Brunei, Sukarno stepped up his policy of *Konfrontasi*, or confrontation. Soon the British had deployed seven battalions to Borneo, and in April 1964 the British Prime Minister approached Australia about sending forces to Borneo.²⁶ This request was resisted, yet the Australian Army faced the prospect of having to send troops to three areas, Vietnam; Borneo and New Guinea—the latter being necessary if Indonesia sent infiltrators into New Guinea.

These pressures came at a time when the Australian Army was having doubts about the utility of the Pentropic organisation. The Americans had already abandoned their pentomic structure, and if Australian units were to be deployed to either Borneo or Vietnam they had to be able to fit into British or American structures. By late 1964 the CGS, Lieutenant-General Wilton, had decided that there were four main factors justifying a reorganisation of the Field Force. Firstly, under the new strategic basis the 1st Division was more likely to operate in separate strategic areas than fight as one cohesive unit. Secondly, the emphasis on cold war tasks implied a need for smaller, lightly supported, infantry battalions. Thirdly, the increasing

availability of tactical air support allowed an overall reduction in road transport. And fourthly, there was the possibility, although no means assured, that the manpower problem might be alleviated by some form of national service. But in the end, perhaps the most significant factor was, as Wilton said, 'it's not the size of the battalions that counts; it's the number'.²⁷

Responding to these pressures, on 10 November 1964 the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, presented a major defence statement to Parliament in which he pointed to the possibility of war with Indonesia and announced the largest increase in defence spending since the Second World War. The Army's Pentropic organisation was to be abolished and the battalions were to return to an organisation that would be compatible with British formations. The Army was to double its number of Regular battalions from four to eight; the Pacific Islands Regiment was to be doubled from one to two battalions; and the SAS Company was to expand to form an SAS Regiment. To meet the requirement for more personnel, a selective National Service scheme was to be introduced. Both the navy and the air force were to be increased in size and provided with new equipment over the following three years.²⁸

Under the Tropical Warfare establishment, which was approved at the end of 1964, the division was to include ten infantry battalions (one for protection tasks), a cavalry regiment, three field artillery regiments, a divisional locating battery, an aviation regiment and an allocation of engineers, signals and other support units. There would be three task force headquarters under which units could be grouped for training and operations.

The reorganisation was given additional impetus by the announcement in April 1965 that the government was to deploy an infantry battalion to Vietnam in June. Furthermore, the CGS, Lieutenant-General Wilton, began preparing to send a task force of two battalions the following year. To meet this requirement, between mid-1965 and mid-1966 the four existing infantry battalions were expanded to eight.

It is not my task to describe how this new organisation was introduced or how it performed. That subject will be covered by Brigadier O'Brien in a later presentation. But I would like to reflect on how far the Army of 1965 had developed since 1950, and also note the legacy from this period. The developments were as follows.

- In 1950 the Army was headed by a Military Board. In 1965 it was still headed by a Military Board although a permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee had been established.
- In 1950 the Army was organised on a geographic command basis. That organisation was still in place in 1965. It no longer exists.
- In 1950 there were plans to establish a regular brigade, but there was little progress. In 1965 a regular division was being formed with three brigades or task forces. Until recently, and to a certain extent, we still have that division, and the battalions still have roughly the same structure as that hurriedly put together in 1965.
- In 1950 the defence of Australia was built around a large CMF. In times of major war this CMF was to be mobilised and deployed to the Middle East. Much of the Regular Army's effort was spent on supporting the CMF. By 1965 the CMF had been reduced considerably. The ARA was now the major part of the Army. Plans to send the CMF overseas had been abandoned. The strategy was forward defence, which required an expanded Regular Army.
- In 1950 a large proportion of the population had some experience of the Army. First and Second World War veterans were numerous, and indeed, it was only 30 years since the end of the First World War. In 1965 there were still many Australians with some recent connection to the Army. In addition to the Second World War veterans, perhaps over 200,000 Australians had served in the CMF and National Service scheme during the 1950s. Now in 1997 it is over 50 years since the end of the Second World War. Fewer Australians have any recent connection with the Army than at any time in the last century.
- In 1950 the Regular Army had units deployed permanently overseas. The British Occupation Force had been deployed to Japan since 1946. This deployment was

followed by Korea, Malaya and Malaysia. Australia has not had units deployed permanently overseas since 1973.

- In 1950 doctrine was directed towards conventional operations in a brigade or divisional setting. In 1965 doctrine was counter-insurgency in a tropical environment.
- In 1950 no units of the Australian Regular Army had fought in combat. By 1965 the Regular Army had already established a proud tradition of its own, building on, but separate from, the traditions of the AIF.
- In 1950 the Army consisted of standard infantry, artillery and armoured units. By 1965 the Army also included a CMF commando regiment and an SAS regiment. There was also the beginnings of an Army aviation corps.
- In 1950 the Army's equipment was that which was left-over from the Second World War and was mainly British in origin. By 1965 new equipment was arriving that was mainly American in origin; some of that equipment is still in use.
- In 1950 radio and electronic equipment was at an elementary level. By 1965 there had been major developments in the use of radio-relay, man-pack radios, radar and on-line encryption. This would have a major impact on the shape of operations in Vietnam.
- In 1950 the artillery still had a substantial coast arm and numerous anti-aircraft units. By 1965 the coast arm had disappeared and the anti-aircraft units had declined dramatically. The coast arm has never been revived and the Army still has few air defence units.
- In June 1950 the Regular Army had a strength of 14,543. By 1965 it had expanded to 23,534, but in 1996 it was only 2000 more at 25,964.²⁹
- In June 1950 the CMF had a strength of 18,236, although it was to climb to 87,291 in 1956. By 1965 it was down to 29,221, and by 1996 it was down to 25,390.

From these snapshots we can go part of the way to understanding the importance of the 1950s and early 1960s in the development of the Australian Army. The task of the historian is to put some shape on the past and in so doing provide insights as to why we are the way we are now. Only then can we make reasoned decisions about which direction to proceed for the future. The Australian Army has undergone many major changes since 1965. Nonetheless, despite the passage of time the Australian Army's experience between 1950 and 1965 was fundamental in producing the Australian Army as we know it today.

Endnotes

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- 2 . MCJ Welburn, *The Development of Australian Army Doctrine, 1945-1964* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1994), p 28.
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5. Quoted in TB Millar, 'Australian Defence, 1945-1965', in Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (eds), *Australia in World Affairs, 1961-1965* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1968), p 267.
6. JE Murphy, 'History of the Post War Army 1945-1953', prepared for the Military Board, 1955, p 168.
- 7 . Report, Committee of Inquiry into the Citizen Military Forces, March 1974, Appendix B-2.
8. For Armoured Corps developments see Major-General RNL Hopkins, *Australian Armour: A History of the Royal Australian Armoured Corps 1927-1972* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1978).
9. For the Army in the Emergency see Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950-1966* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996).
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12. For the Royal Australian Regiment see David Horner (ed), *Duty First: The Royal Australian Regiment in War and Peace* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).
13. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol 14, p 573.
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18. 'Composition of the Australian Defence Forces', Report by the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, to Minister for Defence, June 1959, Australian War Memorial, AWM 121, item 28/A/2.
- 19 . Notes on Cabinet Submission, 10 February 1960, CRS A1945/T1, item 19/4/2.
20. Department of Defence, 'Key Elements in the Triennial Review of Strategic Guidance Since 1945', Canberra, 1986.
21. For discussion of the introduction of the Pentropic organisation see JC Blaxland, *Organising an Army: The Australian Experience 1957-1965* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1989).
22. 'The Pentropic Division', in *Australian Army Journal* 129 (February 1960), p 7.
23. Notes on Some Events Preceding the Development of the Pentropic Division, 19 June 1961, AWM 121, item 13/c/4.
24. Blaxland, *Organising an Army*, p 47.
- 25 . 'List of Existing CMF Formations and Arms Units of Regiment and Battalion Status, Showing Changes Resulting From 1960 Reorganisation', 4 March 1960, CRS A6059/2, item 41/441/69 Part 1.
26. David Horner, 'The Australian Army and Indonesia's Confrontation with Malaysia', *Australian Outlook* 43: 1 (April 1989), p 65.
27. Blaxland, *Organising an Army*, p 104.
28. Ministerial Statement by Sir Robert Menzies, *Parliamentary Debates*, 10 November 1964.
29. *Defence Report* 1963, p 58; *Defence Report* 1973, p 53; *Defence Annual Report 1995-1996*, p 197.