

***FROM PAST TO FUTURE:  
THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE OF LAND/AIR OPERATIONS***

**OPENING ADDRESS  
Lieutenant-General John Sanderson**

Retired General Officers, Director, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to this, the second Annual Army History Conference.

My predecessor made a commitment to running a conference which examined Army's involvement in past conflicts, as a contribution to the education of our Officer Corps. While reaffirming that commitment, I would also like to expand on it by saying that I believe that the study of military history in a forum such as this can make a wider contribution to the future development of the whole Australian Defence Force. For that reason I am particularly pleased that the subject of the 1995 Army History Conference is land/air operations, as joint operations are a necessary focus for the Australian Army as it looks to its future employment in defence of the nation.

The title of this conference, 'From the Past to the Future: The Australian Experience of Land/Air Operations', clearly expresses its two main themes. The first of these, 'from the past to the future', provides the main focus of the conference. It is my belief that studying the experience of the past can make a valuable contribution to developing more effective organisational structures and doctrines which will guide our forces in combat on the battlefields of the future. The second theme, 'the Australian experience of land/air operations in the Second World War, Korea and Vietnam', will present the relevant aspects of land/air cooperation in an historical framework which permits us to perceive the important lessons of the past. It is with this second theme that I would like to begin, before moving on to a brief consideration of what the future can learn from the past.

**The Australian Experience of Land/Air Cooperation**

Every major conflict since the end of the Second World War has been joint in nature and there is little to indicate that this trend will change in the foreseeable future. Over the past two decades, the Australian Defence Force has worked at becoming a more unified force with a joint approach to the defence of Australia. The current study of the Army for the 21st century is building on this base, to ensure that the nation will have a balanced force capable of responding to the security challenges of the next century. It is this contemporary context which makes the study of Australia's involvement in land/air operations of the past so important and timely.

Cooperation between land and air forces was perfected in the Second World War, but it was a product of the First World War. It is worth noting here that Australians played a pioneering role in its development. Without making any extravagant claims about providing a model for the development of Blitzkrieg, Monash's integration of infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft in the Battle of Hamel on 4 July 1918 was most certainly the model for the type of combined arms attacks which broke the German Army's ability to continue fighting. At Hamel aircraft were used to attain local air superiority, for close air support of the tank/infantry teams and also for reconnaissance and deception tasks.

Though important to the success of the battle, these roles were in themselves unremarkable. In 1918 co-ordinated artillery barrages, tanks and aircraft had been available to the Allies for over two years. What was remarkable about their employment at Hamel was not their individual power as weapons systems, but rather the philosophy and organisation which guided their use. As Monash himself described it, 'A perfected modern battle plan is like nothing so much as a score for an orchestral composition, where various arms and units are the instruments, and the tasks they perform are their respective musical phrases'.

Sadly, such unique perspectives on warfare were allowed to run to waste after the end of the First World War. Self-examination and professional development were swamped by public

ignorance and neglect of all matters related to defence. The result was that, when the Second World War broke out, many valuable lessons about co-operation between arms and services had to be rediscovered in a costly process of trial and error.

This is a problem which in the future we must avoid, particularly as the increased tempo of war in an age of high technology will not permit us the luxury of time in which to learn from our mistakes. The study of both past successes and mistakes furnishes us with detailed knowledge of this hard won experience; it is in fact the most valuable gift from the past to the future.

### **From the Past to the Future**

The late eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke warned that 'you can never plan the future by the past' and, while this may be true in a general sense, in a period of rapid change it is helpful to keep the past in mind, rather as when driving it is wise to keep checking the rear-vision mirror. The past is a useful but imperfect reference point. History cannot anticipate the future, because human events are too complex to produce neat patterns or cycles. However, what history can do for military planners is to offer us plausible alternatives, describe a range of possibilities and throw a calculating eye over the more immoderate theories. In short, when it comes down to the business of planning force structures and doctrine, what history offers us is a tool with which to sort out the significant from the insignificant, to decide what is pivotal and what is peripheral.

Another reason why armed forces must turn to history for instruction is because war, the actual business of our profession, is not continuous but, rather, sporadic. While personally I find this a source of great relief, it does create some unique problems for armed forces, not the least of which is the human tendency to forget the details of the past and idealise them into a mythology. An army which forgets its past and believes its own mythology is riding for a fall.

When the Russians invaded Chechnya earlier this year, their Defence Minister, General Grachov, said it would take only a few hours to put down the secessionists. He should have known better. The armed forces of the Soviet Union had a definition of military history which stated that it began yesterday and worked backwards. General Grachov had obviously forgotten this. He had also forgotten the Soviet failure in Afghanistan and that the old Imperial Russian Army had taken decades, not hours, to annex the territory which belonged to the ancestors of the Chechens.

If, as the Russian example indicates, armed forces have short institutional memories, there is an obvious lesson here for the ADF. The cadre of combat veterans in our defence force is extremely small and their combat experience was gained in relatively junior positions in the command structure. They now occupy senior positions and their combat experience may at times have little bearing on their current tasks. That is why, when looking to develop operational concepts and doctrines for Army's future directions, we must look beyond our own limited experience. Liddell Hart believed that 'Direct experience is inherently too limited to form an adequate foundation for either theory or for application'. At best it produces an atmosphere that is of value in drying and hardening the structure of thought. The value of indirect experience lies in its greater variety and extent.

It is for this very reason that I am happy to see so many retired senior officers in the audience. I am also pleased to see that our speakers represent an immense variety of experience and perspectives. Our keynote speaker, Dr Roger Spiller, is an eminent American academic from the US Army's Combat Studies Institute. Our Australian presenters will provide the perspectives of both academics and serving officers. Because of this diversity, this audience and those who read the proceedings of this conference will be able to learn a great deal from the range of experience and views presented here today.

It has been said that the history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world. My intention, through these annual conferences and other initiatives, is to put history to work for Army. It is therefore my great pleasure to declare this second Army History Conference open.