

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

INTRODUCTION

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Benjamin Disraeli once remarked that 'change is inevitable in a progressive country: change is constant'. And change has indeed been the constant factor in the experience of the Australian Army since its formation in 1901.

The impetus for change has been both external and internal: the strategic environment in which the Army has had to operate has been dynamic since the first day, and has included the character forming experiences of two of the bloodiest wars in history. Equally, the internal structure and organisation of the Army has changed to accommodate factors as diverse as financial uncertainty and depression, technological change and the evolving expectations of Australian society.

Change is not necessarily always considered to be good: Henry George once observed that 'there is danger in reckless change; but even greater danger in blind conservatism'. The challenge is to determine at the point of decision whether the planned change is indeed reckless or simply long overdue.

A key to successful decision making is an appreciation of the hard won experience derived from past events. Military decision makers have long recognised the importance of understanding the past when planning for the future. It was the patriarch of military thinkers, General Carl von Clausewitz, who said: 'Only the study of military history is capable of giving those who have no experience of their own a clear picture of the friction of the whole'. If the examination of the experience of the past is accompanied by sound and critical analysis, a useful, quantifiable example of the consequences of decision making can be produced.

It is perhaps for this reason that the more successful commanders in history have made the study of military history a key part of their professional development. It is history which prompts the imagination: allowing cause and effect to be visualised. And even though it is difficult to foresee the true consequence of applied high-technology weapon systems for the future, the reaction of human beings to battlefield stress is a constant.

Perhaps it is also for this reason that military history conferences have become so popular and that modern military history studies now embrace a broader spectrum of human behaviour than in the past.

This year's Army History Conference has been scheduled for this month to mark the 50th anniversary of a major change in the organisation and structure of the Australian Army. On 13 September 1947, the Minister for the Army, the Honourable C Chambers, MP, approved a military board minute stating that the permanent military forces should be known as the 'Australian Regular Army'. Prior to 1947 successive Australian governments had resisted the creation of a regular army, comprising all arms and services, in peacetime. Under the terms of the *Defence Act* of 1903, peacetime permanent forces were restricted to administrative and instructional staffs together with small numbers in certain specialist corps such as artillery and engineers. Indeed, the Army's first permanent peacetime Manoeuvre Unit, the Darwin Mobile Force, raised in 1938, was raised under this restrictive regime.

The experience of the Second World War radically changed the government's perceptions of the national defence task. It was recognised that the development of the international system of collective security, together with the needs of British Commonwealth defence, required a new approach to Australian defence planning. In June 1947 this recognition was given expression in cabinet's approval of an ambitious postwar defence policy.

From the Army's perspective, the key element of this policy was best expressed by the Minister for Defence, John Dedman, when he said: 'While the control of sea communications and air superiority are essential foundations, comprehensive land operations, in which land and air forces must be combined against a resolute and well armed enemy, are the means by which victory is ultimately won'. Was this a prescient view of the future air-land battle philosophies of the latter part of the 20th century?

The role of the postwar army hinged on a new requirement to provide immediately available, limited capability land forces for commitment to United Nations operations and Commonwealth defence tasks, in addition to providing the traditional base for expansion in time of major crisis. It was this need for immediate availability that underpinned the decision to establish a permanent or standing component of Army, in addition to the traditional reserve forces or the militia with their focus on the defence of Australia.

It is worth noting that this plan to make fundamental changes to defence was not greeted with total approval. The reaction of the parliamentary opposition to the new policy was less than enthusiastic, with one opposition member stating: 'Our future Navy, apparently, will consist of two cruisers and a few light craft which would possibly be a fleet suitable for Albania; whilst the Army and Air Force proposed for our future requirements would be more appropriate to a country like Patagonia'—which was a little bit unfair to the Air Force at the time, as it was one of the larger air forces in the world in 1947.

It is important that the significance of what happened 50 years ago this month be fully appreciated. The developments of those years provide the theme of this Army History Conference.