

## THE HISTORY OF 2 RAR'S BLACK DRUMS

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Bound for the Korean War, in Sydney on 5 March 1953, the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) embarked on the Motor Vessel *New Australia*, disembarking in Pusan, Korea on 17 March.<sup>1</sup> In this early stage, the unit's war diary makes special mention of its band's black drums. Australian Army bands began to develop a uniquely Australian style from the 1950s.

After disembarking, the battalion moved to Camp Seaforth in Pusan for kitting and preparation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a small advance party travelled north to join 1 RAR and 3 RAR at Camp Casey, where the unit in full arrived on 22 March. Their war diary records that on 18 March, "Coys [sic] marched [from Seaforth] to war cemetery with the Band and each coy [sic] sounded Last Post and Reveille prior to leaving cemetery."

With an eye on history for the sake of eternal lamentation, the diary goes on to explain why 2 RAR's band's drums are black:

New drums were ordered from England. These drums were received by the Bn [sic] and were unpacked on the day of the death of His Late Majesty King George VI [6 February 1952]. On being uncrated it was found that the drums had been painted black to protect them during the voyage. Since that date the drums have remained black in perpetual mourning. For this reason black has been partly accepted as the unofficial colour for the unit. On arrival at Camp Casey it was found that the telephone code colour for the unit was black.



*The Band of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment in Korea (2 June 1953)*

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<sup>1</sup> War Diary of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (PDF, p. 3).  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1370504> [Accessed 1 February 2023]

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The theme continued during 2RAR's deployment to the Malayan Emergency, when its flag officially became black.<sup>3 4</sup>

And today, 2 RAR's Pipes and Drums band's Regimental March is 'Back in Black'.<sup>5</sup>



*The 2nd Battalion's pipes and drums in 2015*

Unlike a British tradition, where Pipers and Drummers often deployed with their battalions, with many stories told of them leading troops into battle,<sup>6</sup> there is only one instance of an Australian battalion using martial music during battle. In Korea on 2 July 1952, when 'A' Company 1 RAR was attacking Hill 227, the Officer Commanding, Major David Thompson, had his Piper, Private Jock Burgess, pipe the Company into and through the attack.<sup>7</sup>

### **Australian Army military bands<sup>8</sup>**

The original battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment boasted large bands, at times also incorporating pipes and drums.<sup>9</sup>

Since Federation, military bands of the Australian Army continued to follow British customs and traditions. From the 1950s, a uniquely Australian style began to develop.

The Army School of Music was established in 1953 at Balcombe, Victoria. This marked the development of the modern Army bands we know today. The original battalion bands were converted from brass to military instrumentation during the period from 1964 to 1974. The Australian Army Band Corps formed in 1968, which saw the transfer of battalion musicians to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://2rar-association.net.au/the-association/a-brief-history-2rar/> [Accessed 1 February 2023]

<sup>4</sup> Terrett, LI & Taubert, SC. 2015. *Preserving our proud heritage : the customs and traditions of the Australian Army*, Big Sky Publishing, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Milosavljevic, D. 2009. *Finding New Zealand in Pipe Bands: an ethnography of the 2008 Royal New Zealand Pipe Band Championships*. Master of Arts Dissertation, University of Otago, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Terrett, LI & Taubert, SC. 2015. *Preserving our proud heritage : the customs and traditions of the Australian Army*, Big Sky Publishing, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 224.

the Corps. Many battalions, wishing to maintain their traditions, created new bands (mostly pipes and drums) from within their own ranks.



*The Australian Army Band during the Anzac Day 2022 parade in Brisbane.*

Army bands provide an important and effective means of stimulating and maintaining esprit de corps and morale among troops. They are also a powerful public relations medium. The bands contribute directly to the wellbeing of the Army and communities through participation in military ceremonies and parades; Regal, Vice-Regal, Federal, State and Territory Government ceremonial functions, music education programs, and concerts and community activities.