# *A CENTURY OF SERVICE:*
# *100 YEARS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY*

## *BROKEN LINEAGE:*
## *THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY'S HERITAGE OF DISCONTINUITY*

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Anniversaries are often triumphal occasions: opportunities to celebrate, in this case, a century of the existence of the Australian Army. A centenary implies not only longevity, but also continuity. We are marking a hundred years of continuous institutional existence. This is right and proper. A valuable working definition of a community is 'a human group with a sense of a shared past'. Knowledge and understanding of a shared past is as essential an element in the health of a national institution as it is for a family, a town, or a school. But we should not allow the celebratory tone to distort or conceal. I want to intrude into this festive occasion a more sober, analytical note.

My argument is that despite the institutional continuity that w e are marking this month the history of the Australian Army has been much more fractured and discontinuous than the birthday hoopla might suggest. The 'Australian Army' is a title that encompasses a remarkable and rich diversity. Australia has had not one army but in fact several. It is arguable that every couple of decades the Army has assumed a different form and character. Each of these armies has been Australian, but that each has expressed different characteristics and constitutions. While the Army has enjoyed a continuous existence, it has also encompassed very different manifestations of the martial spirit in this nation's history. (Sometimes those different manifestations have existed simultaneously.) This anniversary is to an extent paradoxical. It is odd that the Australian Army should be marking the anniversary of a century of continuous existence, but that that existence has been marked by a series of major changes, changes which have exercised a significant influence over its character. It would be interesting to trace the ways in which individuals have helped to shape those different armies and how they have fared in them. The Staff Corps officers' feelings of humiliation in the 1920s and 1930s and their role in creating a regular force offers an obvious example. In this essay, though, I want to consider the importance and the implications of this degree of change and discontinuity in the Army's past.

This is a sweeping, synoptic essay and not the result of the detailed research of the kind presented elsewhere in this conference. I have drawn gratefully on the work of several historians, such Jeffrey Grey, Michael Evans, Craig Wilcox, Chris Coulthard-Clark, and Albert Palazzo, who generously lent me the manuscript of his detailed organisational history of the Australian Army. I alone am responsible for the use to which I have put their work.

### Change and Discontinuity

Australians have served as soldiers under many guises. They have been Permanent soldiers, boy soldiers (both cadets and conscripts), unpaid volunteers, paid Militiamen, Compulsory Trainees, members of the wartime AIFs, Regulars and National Servicemen. For long periods some of these forms of soldier have co-existed. These many manifestations have occurred because the Army has undergone a striking number of re-organisations.

These major transformations include the formation of the Commonwealth Military Forces after 1901, their conversion into a mass Militia and a would-be imperial reserve, and the formation of an all-volunteer Australian Imperial Force. At the Great War's end the AIF was demobilised but in an institutional sleight of hand its battle honours, colour patches and unit traditions were bequeathed to the Militia units of the home-based defence force. Between the world wars the Militia was maintained by compulsory service until in 1929 the Depression precipitated a sudden contraction to an all-volunteer force. The 1920s and 1930s saw the tension between officers of a citizen force and the regular Staff Corps. The bitterness between the two groups long poisoned relations among the Army's officers, negating claims that they served one

army. The 1930s also saw the formation of the short-lived Darwin Mobile Force, a precursor of the Regular Army of the post-1945 period. In 1939 a second Australian Imperial Force was raised, which coexisted with a Militia force for the rest of the war. After an Interim Army in 1947 the Australian Regular Army was created. From 1947 to 1975 the Regular Army gradually extended its domination so that in the end the Army Reserve supported a Regular Army, a complete reversal of the relationship prevailing in the first half of the century. Since 1975 while the organisational form has been more-or-less unchanged pressures have been exerted to meet new roles and do so with greater efficiency. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Army faces the challenge of accommodating contracting resources to a vision of regional engagement through both conventional and peacekeeping operations.

The consequence of these periodic changes has bequeathed to the Army a complex lineage, that is, the trail of changes in numbering, title and affiliation by which units trace their institutional family trees. Lineage is an esoteric business; let me illustrate this point by describing briefly the lineage of one of the units inherited by the Commonwealth when the New South Wales Military Forces became subsumed into an Australian Army, a unit local to Canberra.

The lineage of the 4th/3rd Royal New South Wales Regiment, for example, shows how the unit can trace a succession—with gaps and anomalies—from the formation of the Goulburn Volunteer Rifle Company of 1869 to the present. The units in this lineage have undergone many changes, including eighteen changes of name, number or title since 1901. The major events in this lineage include:

- 1903, the formation of Australian Infantry Regiments from colonial antecedents;
- 1908, when these regiments were organised into separate battalions;
- 1912, when the introduction of Universal Training resulted in the formation of new territorially based regiments;
- 1914, when new AIF battalions were raised;
- 1921, when CMF units were re-titled based on AIF battalions;
- 1927, when territorial titles were introduced (in this case re-introducing a title used briefly before 1914);
- 1929-35, when CMF battalions were disbanded or merged;
- 1936-39, when CMF battalions were unlinked and re-formed;
- 1943-46, when CMF units were again disbanded or merged (in this case, unusually with its second AIF counterpart);
- 1948, when CMF battalions were re-raised;
- 1960, when CMF battalions were disbanded or incorporated into the state-based regiments as part of the Pentropic experiment; and
- 1987, when the 3rd and 4th RNSWR battalions were merged.[1]

There is speculation that a further change of catchment area and numbering will see it become part of a 1/19th or 4/19th RNSWR. There is a geographical connection between the units that served under these many changes of number and title. The title ' Werriwa' was first conferred in 1914, and indicates a connection with southern New South Wales. But otherwise it would take a knowledgeable lineage specialist to understand that they shared at least a formal institutional connection.[2]

This typically confusing lineage reflects the institutional history of the Australian Army's citizen soldier infantry. It is easy enough to remember the 60 battalions of the First AIF, the 48 of the second and the nine battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment. But no one besides a handful of aficionados and regimental enthusiasts can make any sense of this catalogue of numbers and titles. Large chunks of the Army's past are not so much forgotten as utterly incomprehensible. The Army's lineage is so much broken that it is now incomprehensible to itself. This is a bleak view, and one that I acknowledge must be modified by one major qualification. While the lineage of the old Militia infantry is virtually unintelligible, that of the corps which constitute the present Army is generally known and accessible. For example, while few possess a detailed knowledge of the Royal Australian Artillery's unit lineage, even the newest recruits soon acquire an awareness of the regiment's history, which pre-dates that of the Army itself.

The contrast is of course the British Army, which offers an example of marked institutional stability at least at the level of lineage. The Cheshire Regiment, for example, has been the 22nd Regiment since 1751, and has been connected with Cheshire since 1781. The British Army appears to adapt organisations rather than change them wholesale. Australia, by contrast, appears to have adopted a more pragmatic approach. For example, confronted in 1914 with a need to raise mass volunteer armies. Britain grafted the Kitchener volunteers onto its existing regimental structure while Australia formed a new force, the AIF. This willingness to adopt radical new organisational structures to meet current needs has been apparent throughout the twentieth century. While the British Army has confronted drastic contractions and has met them with multiple and often strained amalgamations, the impression is of continuity rather than change. The result for Australia, however, is that for a small army over a comparatively short period the Army has undergone a succession of profound changes. All of these have affected its character, its ethos, its relationship to Australian society and the relationships of power within the Army itself.

I want to look at three periods of change: the formation and transformation of the 'Federal army', the Pentropic experiment and the abortive 'Army 21' scheme. Each suggests insights into continuity or discontinuity and our understanding of the Army's institutional history.

## Periods of Change

### *The Federal Army*

In the wake of Federation the military forces inherited from the Australian colonies were organised into a federal force. Militia, volunteer and permanent soldiers and units from six former colonial forces, plus the few Commonwealth troops raised in the last months of the South African war, came together to form the Commonwealth's military forces. The *Defence Act* of 1903 ordered this colonial inheritance into what we might call the Federal army. (It is a sign of the neglect that this period has suffered that w e do not even have a term for the army during the decade between Federation and the Great War.) The Federal army created by Edward Hutton embodied a vision of, as its premier historian Craig Wilcox, described it, 'a vast part-time army of seven infantry divisions and seven light horse brigades ... armed, equipped, trained and organised in exactly the same way as regular army formations'.[3] The achievement of this structure represented, as Chris Coulthard-Clark described it, a 'spectacular transformation'.[4] By 1913 it comprised 23 regiments of Light Horse, twenty batteries of field artillery and 52 battalions of infantry. The formation of these Militia units entailed the dismantling of the volunteer units which since the mid-nineteenth century had been the main and later the elite of the colonies' citizen forces. By 1912 the old-fashioned unpaid, self-funding volunteer passed from the scene, the first of many profound changes through which the new Australian Army would pass.

This army—and it was only about 1912 that it began to be described as one—was dominated by the Citizen soldier, the Militiaman. It comprised a tiny component of permanent units and cadres, mainly of artillery and technical troops, but its infantry and mounted units entirely comprised part time soldiers. Indeed, this army was under the *Defence Act* forbidden from possessing regular infantry. This citizen force army, reinforced by compulsory trainees remained in existence in 1914, so that Australia maintained a home-based Militia throughout the Great War. This Militia was virtually destroyed by the creation of the AIF. Denuded of officers and instruction, it was a shadow army, one which inherited the organisation, titles, distinctions and honours of the AIF when it was re-organised in 1921. Here was a blind alley, a brutal blow against the citizen Militia which had seemed to the creators of the Federal army a natural form for Australia's defence.

## *The Pentropic experiment*

The great contest at the heart of the Army's history in the twentieth century is arguably not the campaigns against the Kings' enemies in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, but the turbulent partnership of regular and citizen soldier. It is widely acknowledged that in the mid-twentieth century Australia possessed two armies. Even after the creation of a Regular Army in 1947 the regular force was regarded as sustaining the citizen rather than the reverse. Indeed, it was not until the failed Pentropic experiment of 1959-64 that the balance decisively shifted, away from the citizen and toward the regulars.[5]

The Pentropic experiment of 1959-64 deserves closer attention because its effects, if not its motivations, effectively completed the transformation begun by the creation of a Regular Army in 1947. At least 29 Militia battalions had been disbanded during the Second World War (including the 39th, the heroes of Kokoda and Gona). In 1960 the Army lost a further thirty CMF battalions. After the CMF had been reorganised the entire CMF infantry comprised only nine battalions. The CMF lost more than half of its artillery and all of its formation headquarters units. Successive commentators deny that the Pentropic reorganisation constituted a conspiracy or a plot by Regulars against citizen forces. It is implausible that such an elaborate, expensive and—because it failed—dangerous expedient would have been employed to cloak the evisceration of the CMF. At the same time, one of the most profound consequences of the Pentropic experiment was to destroy the primacy of the old CMF. The reorganisation following the abandonment of the Pentropic system resulted in the restoration of just six CMF battalions (which adopted the numbers of some of the 'lost' battalions).

This is important not only for sentimental reasons. While old citizen soldiers were undoubtedly sorry to see the loss from the order of battle of, say the old 6th Battalion, the NSW Mounted Rifles, a unit with colonial antecedents and connections to AIF battalions, it was not only a matter of sentiment. The change from a battalion conscious of a longer lineage than most in Australia into the Support Company of the 2nd Battalion, the Royal New South Wales Regiment, signified a decisive break in continuity of function as well as identity.

The creation of the state-based regiments in 1960—yet another novel form of unit—itself aroused resentment. Major General Kevin Cooke at an earlier Army conference described the formation of the Royal Queensland, Royal Victoria and the other state CMF regiments as 'seen by many as a deliberate attempt to destroy the long established citizen force traditions'.[6] Was there a Regular vendetta against the CMF? Certainly many CMF officers believe so. For example, one of the consequences of the Millar Inquiry recommendations of the early 1970s was to disband or amalgamate dozens of CMF units. This was based on a requirement that they reach 70 per cent of their establishments. Many could not—especially when they were required to meet the higher Regular Army establishments rather than the former, lower, CMF ones. That reason for the CMF's low strength in the early 1970s in the wake of Vietnam enabled the CMF's detractors to reduce it size and subordinate its function altogether. As a result, the old CMF passed out of existence and became in name as well as function, a Reserve to the Regular Army.

## *'Army 21'*

Finally let me consider a change which did not occur. In the mid-1990s a review of the land force structure resulted in a report An Australian Army for the 21st Century, known as 'Army 21'. It proposed bold reorganisation based not on traditional structures but upon strategic needs and upon the characteristics of land warfare in the continuing 'Revolution in Military Affairs'. 'Army 21' envisaged not a battalion or brigade but an Enhanced Combat Force comprising a new all-arms unit integrating combat arms and support troops and including Regulars and Reservists. 'Army 21' was partially tested but not fully implemented. It aroused opposition from advocates of the need to maintain separate corps (and not only on sentimental grounds) and from those sceptical of the need for such thoroughgoing change. In the end the concept was negated by a change in 1997 in the government's willingness to meet crises in the Asia-Pacific region, though its justification in terms of the Revolution in Military Affairs arguably remains viable.

But 'Army 21', in the eyes of the Chief of Army who directed the development of its successor, a maritime strategy, was itself in some ways a conservative concept. It was founded on the 'continental defence' notion which had governed the Army's strategic thinking since 1975. In this light, however organisationally novel ' Army 21' appeared to be, it looked back as well as forward.[7] And despite the intense arguments over its assumptions and implications, its opponents were not merely conservative in the sense of seeking to deny or impede change: many also advanced alternatives which likewise would have entailed organisational and even cultural changes.

'Army 21' was abortive in that no actual Enhanced Combat Force as such was formed. But it was fertile in that it arguably gave the Army a framework through which to consider the changing circumstances it would confront and to accept that changes in structure and function would continue to occur. 'Army 21', then, was merely the most thoroughgoing potential change of an Army which by the 1990s was accustomed to continuing change as a fact of life. Michael Evans, in his study *Forward from the Past*, shows how in the quarter century following the end of the Vietnam commitment the Army had become accustomed to re-considering its doctrine, its force structures and its rationale in a climate of geo-political uncertainty. 'Army 21' did not occur as its advocates envisaged, but change did not stop and has not ended. Indeed, change itself is a certainty, in military as in other spheres in our society. Today's planners serve the 'Army-in-Being' looking forward to an 'Enhanced Combat Force' up to twenty years ahead and the 'Army-After-Next' a third of a century into the future.

Not that change is always beneficial. We can identify many changes which are highly debatable. The close relationship between an army and the society which sustains it can erode the effectiveness as a military institution. For example, in accordance with the values of our society women have assumed a progressively greater share of military roles. It is conceivable, however, that opening combat support tasks to women may be exposed as mistaken in a future war with an adversary observing different conventions. We have also seen the increasing bureaucratisation and civilianisation of the army in a political culture valuing economic rationalism over military efficiency. Reviewing the succession of efficiency reviews to which the Defence Force has been subjected over the past decade, it might be said that in hindsight the extent of change has been excessive and counter-productive. As Albert Palazzo points out, for a decade 'the defence report has identified the services as "programs" and their operations as "sub-programs" and referred to the chief of services as "program managers".[8] This bureaucratisiation, subordinating operational terminology and efficiency to the power of economic rationalisation may in time prove to be yet another discontinuity, a break with another strand of the past. It is difficult to imagine William Throsby Bridges regarding himself as the 'manager' of the 'Dardanelles sub-program'.

The Army's organisational history suggests that there have been two sorts of changes. On the one hand there has been a relatively slow evolution of ideas evaluated and refined. For example, from the 1970s to the 1990s there have been the extension of the idea of jointness, of the creation of one army able to be deployed operationally rapidly and supported efficiently, the move to the north. And there have been the dramatic changes such as I have surveyed: the creation of a Federal army; the introduction and the end of compulsory military service; the raising and demobilisation of the AIFs, the formation of the Staff Corps, the establishment of a regular army; the Pentropic and Ready Reserves experiments: the doomed ' Army 21' concept. Each of these events exerted a profound impact on the Army, its members and on its character as an institution.

It is arguable, then, that the Australian Army has a history of confronting and often implementing major, often profound changes, not least in the past twenty five years. Is it justifiable to describe the Army is an adapting army? Irrespective of whether those changes were regarded as effective (the formation of the AIFs or the creation of a Regular Army) or ineffective (Hutton's imperial reserve or the Pentropic divisions) the Army has not only survived change, but might even come to expect it as inevitable. Institutions, like the individuals who comprise them, can learn to adapt. Perhaps the Australian Army has done just this. Its history is not a seamless evolution. It includes major disjunctions, missed opportunities and dead ends: but it is a more interesting and arguably a stronger institution as a result.

This realisation prompts several important questions. How can an army conscious of its institutional heritage respond to changes imposed by external threat, political policies, social or technological transformation? On the one hand armies value tradition and continuity, not out of habit or romanticism, but because an awareness of an institution's past strengthens its members' sense of identity and leads to greater commitment. On the other, armies are increasingly obliged to adapt more rapidly than ever to a host of changing influences—strategic, operational, technological, social, financial and political—and remain static at the cost of their effectiveness. The question is: what has been the effect of the changes through which the Australian Army has passed since 1901 on the nature of the Army?

## Conclusion

This is not to argue that any particular manifestation of an army is the right one for Australia, now or in the past. Indeed, one of the striking points about the Australian Army historically is that it has adopted different guises with success. Tolstoy may have been right in claiming in *Anna Karenina* that 'happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way' but if we apply that aphorism to military organisations the insight might be inverted. Effective military organisations are not all alike: they differ in a myriad ways. Take several Australian units at various points in the Army's history: a volunteer battalion of the early Federal army; an AIF battalion on Gallipoli; another in the autumn of 1918; an AIF battalion in North Africa or Borneo; a Militia battalion in New Guinea; a battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment in Korea, Borneo, Vietnam, Somalia or Timor. Each of these units is likely to have been an effective military organisation: but in composition, motivation, attitude, skills, styles of command and on many other dimensions they are likely to have been different. Many differences are subtle; others are profound. To take widely divergent examples, a permanent soldier of 1913 little resembles an AIF volunteer of 1917; a Militia conscript of 1943 might be very different from his son called up in 1968. A soldier of today's professional army is worlds away from a volunteer in a colonial unit turned overnight into an Australian one. Ours is a young army, but it is also one with a diverse history.

In conclusion, then, I suggest that in surveying the Army's first century we need to ask questions about the history of the institution in which w e are closely concerned. Has the existence of so many Australian armies been a source of weakness or of strength? Should we deplore the frequent changes in title, form, terms of service and composition? Should we regard them as expedient and appropriate to changing circumstances? Should we regard these changes as signs of flexibility and an ability to adapt an institution to the needs of the society, government and nation it serves?

Australia might well lament the short-sightedness that has produced a succession of not always satisfactory solutions to the problem of how to form a defence force to match the aspirations, needs and resources of the nation. But it should also celebrate the fact that it has coped with the changes of the past century by rapidly adapting to changing realities. When I began to write this essay, I implicitly regarded stability and continuity as preferable to change and discontinuity. But in an age in which change is inevitable we should perhaps value discontinuity as being a more valuable and relevant heritage. If a clever organism adapts to change, then Australia's Army may be among the cleverest.

## Endnotes

1. Alfred Festberg, *The Lineage of the Australian Army* (Melbourne; Allara Publishing, 1972), 60, Royal New South Wales Regiment Handbook, Part I, An Introduction (Canberra, 1992).
2. I am grateful to Nigel Webster of 4/3 RNSWR , who generously guided me through the maze of his unit's lineage.
3. Craig Wilcox, *For Hearths and Homes: Citizen Soldiering in Australia 1854-1945* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 59.
4. Chris Coulthard-Clark. 'Formation of the Australian armed services. 1901-14', in M. M c Kernan and M. Browne (eds), *Australia Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988), 121.
5. I am grateful to Albert Palazzo, who generously allowed m e to read his account of the Pentropic period in his forthcoming *The Australian Army: A history of its organisation 1901-2001* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001).
6. K. G. Cooke, 'One Army', in Peter Dennis & Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Second Fifty Years: The Australian Army 1947-1997* (Canberra: School of History, ADFA, 1997), 76.
7. Michael Evans, *Forward from the Past: the Development of Australian Army Doctrine, 1972-Present*, Study Paper No. 301 (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 1999), 6-7.
8. Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, 438.