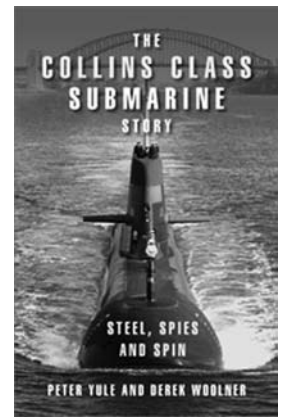


The Collins Class Submarine Story: Steel, Spies and Spin

Peter Yule and Derek Woolner

A review essay by James Goldrick



The Collins Class Submarine Story: Steel, Spies and Spin is the joint production of Peter Yule and Derek Woolner, and is a project commissioned by Cambridge University Press with support from the Department of Defence. It cites its aim as ‘simply to tell the story of the submarine project from its origins to about 2005.’ The book itself is based upon a combination of unclassified, open source and specially declassified material and, perhaps most importantly, more than 130 interviews with many of the protagonists.

In many ways the book achieves what it sets out to do. The authors have, despite the introduction indicating a certain *hauteur* in relation to military and defence issues, presented an honest, generally dispassionate and reasonably comprehensive narrative. They have let the various actors speak for themselves and, so far as the third-person narrative permits, with their own voices. They convey very well the tale of an extraordinarily ambitious project that achieved much, but which was dogged by complex problems, conflicting interests and increasing controversy as the years went on. They give credit where it is due and are careful about ascribing blame to individuals. This is as it should be, since some of the decisions which may appear most egregious in retrospect generally had more than reasonable justification at the time.

Nevertheless, there are some significant faults. The text is somewhat dense and the technical explanations not always completely clear (particularly in areas such as sonar and submarine noise), to a degree that your reviewer occasionally wondered whether these complex topics had been fully mastered by the authors themselves. This may be the result of the text having been significantly compressed from the original manuscript, but the book remains in need of further editing, which might have shortened it further while improving the clarity of the narrative.

The publisher-led compression has also exacerbated some fundamental problems of method and of historiography. The book’s primary reliance upon oral history creates certain limitations because the statements deployed in evidence reflect not only the prejudices and preoccupations of the subjects but their ‘spin’, whether unconscious or not. Despite the book’s subtitle *Steel, Spies and Spin*, such ‘spin’ seems not always to have been apparent to the authors. While it may have been right to seek a principal author (Peter Yule)

who had no preconceptions from previous associations with the Collins class, or the RAN, there could also have been a price to pay through an inability to question more deeply just what lay behind some of the underlying assumptions and statements made in interviews.

Surprisingly, the historical background to the Collins Class is sketchy at best and sometimes misleading at worst. This is partly the result of the editing process and the compression already criticised. But it also reflects both limited reading and a lack of consultation with other naval historians – particularly regrettable deficiencies given the nature of this writing project. There are two important consequences. The first is that a more detailed assessment of the RAN’s previous experiences with submarines, and a deeper analysis of their intended roles within the Navy’s force structure, would have made much more comprehensible the context for the revival of the submarine arm at the beginning of the 1960s – and the subsequent debate over the priority that submarines should receive.

The second is that the book tends to assume that the views of the early Oberon-vintage submariners accurately describe and assess the perspective and the views of the remainder of the Navy, particularly its leadership, not only in the 1960s but even up to the present day. The statement in the last pages that (*italics added*) ‘*Even if not entirely accepted throughout the navy, the role and effectiveness of submarines in Australia’s defence has been established*’ is the culmination of this attitude. This claim of non-acceptance is particularly irritating to a serving member, quite untrue and offered without any evidence at all.

Any argument over the importance of the submarine as a component of the RAN was, even if not already obsolete, absolutely concluded with the demise of the carrier-borne fighter and strike capability in 1982-83. This is a vital point, because the debate that has recently been urged over the size of a future submarine force may be needed in order to judge the relative allocation of resources within a force structure best configured to meet Australia’s future needs. It will not be on the question of whether there should be submarines in the RAN at all – that has long been settled.

That there should have been a certain ‘siege’ mentality in the leadership of the early Oberon force is not entirely

surprising. The submarines were physically separated at Neutral Bay from the fleet's major surface units at Garden Island. They operated in a naturally 'adversarial' tactical environment in relation to the surface fleet and, initially at the rank of lieutenant commander, their commanding officers were vastly junior to the nine captains and six commanders then at sea in command of major combatants and support ships. Their testimony has therefore to be considered with sympathy, but also with care.

Two examples are enough. The first concerns the early years of the Oberon force. Any study of the relative importance being accorded the new submarine capability in its early years must acknowledge some significant facts. The Oberons on commissioning were excellent platforms, but lacked sophisticated fire control systems and deployed a primary weapon system, in the form of the aged Mark VIII straight running torpedo, that was the equivalent, to quote a contemporary analogy, 'of arming a Chieftain tank with a two-pounder gun'. The series of weapon, sensor and combat sensor developments which eventually produced the Submarine Weapons Update Program (SWUP) for the Oberon class were set in train within a few years of the commissioning of the first RAN unit. This occurred in an atmosphere of increasing economic constraint and at a time when the Australian fleet was still ostensibly centred on its aircraft carrier. In describing this effort, *The Collins Class Submarine Story* makes it clear in some ways just what an extraordinary achievement SWUP represented (and one greatly to the credit of all concerned). However, the book gives little coverage to describing the wider naval context and the way that the RAN was developing as a whole – or the extent to which the Navy was actually supporting the progress of the submarine force.

This lack of wider context continues in the strictures which are placed on the Navy for a failure to accept the implications of its parentage of a unique type. According to *The Collins Class Submarine Story*, this was reflected during the early years of the Collins class' service in inadequate maintenance and quality control. Fair enough, but the fact that the Defence Organisation as a whole had to adjust to the consequences of the 1997 Defence Efficiency Review, and the subsequent Defence Reform Program, receives little attention and ignores the pressures that the entire naval organisation was experiencing at the time.

The list of interviewees is indicative of the problem. To be fair to the authors, the book does not include a tally of those who were approached but who refused to be involved. Nevertheless, the list is strongly biased towards submariners and does not include a number of senior officers whose perspective would have been extremely valuable. While Vice Admiral Ian MacDougall, Chief-of-Naval-Staff 1991-1994 was interviewed, his comments are relatively limited in scope and suggest that his views were not sought on wider issues. Similarly, although two of the Chiefs-of-Naval Staff in the most important periods have since died (Admiral Michael Hudson, 1985-1991 and Vice Admiral Rod Taylor, 1994-1997), several other flag officers who served as Deputy

Chief-of-Naval-Staff or in posts such as Chief of Naval Operational Requirements and Plans are still very much with us. They would have been able to contribute a great deal, as could successive Secretaries to the Chiefs-of-Naval-Staff in the period.

Your reviewer also wanted the authors to follow up on particular comments and observations, many of which may be extremely perceptive but which are not necessarily developed. The cultural readiness of the RAN's submarine arm for the transition to the new class is a case in point. Although manpower problems clearly played their part, and the shipyard environment was not necessarily ready for a 'hands-on' approach from the prospective operators, there are suggestions that the commissioning crews may have been over-confident in their ability to operate the new platform. This attitude has elsewhere been described to your reviewer by a senior submariner of another navy (and talking about his own Service) as 'the delusion of single-platform expertise', by which the commentator meant that a force which operates only one class of unit has a tendency to confuse its comprehensive understanding of that platform with the possession of a similar mastery over other machines. This makes transition from one type to another a very difficult cultural challenge. It would be interesting to know more about this issue, from all sides.

Despite all these criticisms, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of what is an important national problem and a continuing national challenge. As a piece of history it, and the material assembled in its writing, will be a treasure trove for future historians who can access all the classified files in future years. It will also provide them with a useful starting point when they make their own approaches to the survivors of those who contributed to this book – memory is a false jade and stories tend to change as time passes. What has been said in *The Collins Class Submarine Story* will be a reference in its own right, as well as something to compare with the files when all are eventually opened.

The pity is that, with further research, wider consultation, additional time in production and more rigorous editing, *The Collins Class Submarine Story* could have been very much better. The whole project may simply have not had enough time to develop something which is quite good into an analysis that could have been outstanding. Nevertheless, the book should be compulsory reading for all those involved with complex technological projects. There are lessons in plenty for those who are and will be involved in the Air Warfare Destroyer and Amphibious Platform projects – even if only in the management of complex international and inter-organisational relationships.

In all, a valuable contribution on a subject of continuing national importance. ♦

Peter Yule and Derek Woolner, 'The Collins Class Submarine Story: Steel, Spies and Spin', Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2008, Casebound and jacketed, 371pp., RRP \$A59.95.