

# Strategic Command: General Sir John Wilton and Australia's Asian Wars

David Horner

Reviewed by Professor Jeffrey Grey

Another judicious, scholarly and important book from the prolific David Horner, *Strategic Command* deals with one of the most able and important senior officers in Australia's military history. The range of Wilton's experience throughout his service was extraordinary, even for his generation, while his career paralleled the development of the regular army, from its status as 'poor cousin' when he graduated from RMC Duntroon in 1930 to being at the forefront of Australia's commitment to the Cold War in the region during the 1950s and 1960s.

This, then, is a complex story, and although the broad outline will be generally familiar to many readers, the detail is often fascinating. Wilton became Chief of the General Staff (CGS) at a time of large-scale activity and enormous challenges for the Army, capping a career that had all ready had its fair share of highlights. These included service with the British Army in India following graduation, with opportunities for active service denied to graduates who stayed in Australia, a critical role as senior staff officer to Major General Stan Savige with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in New Guinea, and command of the 28<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Brigade in Korea in 1953-54. He had extensive service with the Americans as well as the British, and as Horner shows this was excellent preparation for the senior positions he filled through the 1960s, in which he oversaw first the Army's and then the three Services' involvement in Malaya, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The core of the book, of course, deals with the nine years Wilton spent at the very top of his profession. The discussion of the policy formulation and decision-making, and the politics of senior command in an active and controversial period, is fascinating and well-handled, matched by Horner's treatment of the personal detail. Despite its sub-title, readers should not assume that this is a 'landscape with portrait' approach to its subject – Wilton is very much at the centre of the book, and it is both a meticulous study of the era and issues and of the man who shaped so many aspects of the Army in his time. In this Horner is greatly assisted by the richness of Wilton's papers, especially the full and detailed correspondence with the family, and with Lady Wilton in particular. I can think of no other significant post-war military figure who is as well-served in this regard, and the depth and richness of the resulting book is the result.

Wilton was something of an enigma to those who did not know him well. Nicknamed, slightly disparagingly, 'smiling Jack' because of his supposed lack of personal warmth and charisma, the reality was very different. The Wiltons enjoyed a wide circle of friends, much of it outside the Army of

his time, and although Horner notes that he lacked much by way of small talk when dealing with soldiers and junior officers, he was highly and widely regarded for his knowledge of his profession, judgement, concern for the welfare of those around and below him, and in fact took a close personal interest in the younger officers who worked for him at various times. But in some ways, it is fair to say that he was as far removed from the caricature of a 'typical' Australian soldier as it was possible to be.

The two words that best describe him are character and intellect; he possessed both in abundance, and in this regard perhaps was also running against the grain. His self-effacing and modest personality here probably stood him in good stead, since military organisations frequently feel threatened by the very bright and morally principled within their ranks. Of his quality and ability there can be no doubt, as his contemporaries knew. In recommending his appointment as CGS his predecessor, Pollard, noted that he was 'an exceptionally able officer with a highly trained, logical mind that leads to brilliance in some fields. He has had the best balanced training of all our General Staff Officers. He is not a colourful personality but, because of his professional competence, strength of purpose and integrity, he is held in very high regard in Army circles'. It was a sign of the Army's growing institutional maturity that it should produce a senior officer of Wilton's calibre at just the point in its history when it needed such qualities most.

Some readers will be aware that Wilton's biography was to have been written by the late Ian McNeill, whose death in 1998 left both that project and the ground combat volumes of the *Official History of Australia in Southeast Asian Conflicts*, unfinished. Ian had done quite a bit of work on the Wilton project, including in particular his period with Savige and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, some of which is reflected here and in Horner's generous acknowledgment of him. Horner has successfully completed a difficult task – taking a project conceived by someone else and making a success of it – and along the way has written the most substantial book on a post-war Australian military figure that we have yet been given. Beautifully produced to Oxford University Press's usual high standards in the Army history series, this is one of Horner's best, and perhaps most important, books. ♦

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