

Australian Airborne: The History and Insignia of Australian Military Parachuting

John O'Connor

Reviewed by Dave Armit

In recent years, the operational experiences of the Australian Defence Force overseas, especially the involvement of individual formations or units, have been more widely captured in fairly general accounts of the operations concerned. These tend to be produced by small publishers, or be self-published. The general motivation is often to publish as quickly as possible to service a small but known market, particularly those personnel directly involved and their families, rather than have them wait years, often in vain, for a considered history to be researched and written. The heritage value and general standard of such books varies widely – although they can assist the media with general background, and they may later help the initial stages of any academic-standard research into the operations described.

Another type of popular book on ADF-related topics are those which concentrate on specialist parts of the defence force, particular weapons platforms (ships, aircraft, tanks, etc), ceremonial or militaria matters, or what at first glance is some seemingly arcane subject. These books usually owe their gestation and impetus to the efforts of an enthusiast, but end up providing considerable benefit to professional historians and those charged with the statutory responsibility to manage the defence force's large, increasing and important national heritage responsibilities – such as the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and the three Service history units. A classic example is Stephen Talbot's *Formation Signs and Vehicle Markings of the Australian Army 1903-1983*, produced as a limited edition of 100 only in 1997, but subsequently extensively used by the AWM, historians and Army museums and training schools nationwide.

Australian Airborne: The History and Insignia of Australian Military Parachuting falls readily into this latter category. Although having no military experience himself, John O'Connor has collected and researched military awards and medals earned by Australians for over 25 years. His previous book in a similar genre was *Shooting Awards and Prize Medals to Australian Military Forces 1860-2000*, published in 2002, and cited by the AWM on its website as an authoritative reference.

Australian Airborne includes a brief history of all defence force units that have ever been involved with parachuting for military purposes, starting with 1920s experiments in the RAAF. It then moves on to World War II and a good account of training and tribulations of the Australian Parachute Battalion, which despite extensive preparations and planning never got the opportunity to deploy by parachute operationally, although it did help garrison Singapore at war's end. Also included is the courageous story of the battery of the 2/4th Field Regiment whose gunners, with minimal (and in at least one case no) ground training and no previous jumps, volunteered and jumped with US Army paratroops to capture Nadzab in New Guinea in 1943. The World War

II accounts conclude with a good summary of the Special Reconnaissance Department (Z-Special Force) patrols infiltrated by parachute into Japanese-controlled Borneo in preparation for the Oboe series of landings by the 7th Division.

The historical account then moves on to the development of the parachute training school in its RAAF, RAAF-Army and Army stages, its supporting units of riggers, and the air dispatch and parachute-capable units of the modern era: SASR (including RAN elements), 1 Commando Regiment, 4RAR (Commando), D Company 6RAR, 3RAR, and the minor combat support, logistic and medical units that comprise the parachute battalion group capability. Even the various sporting parachute associations and clubs in the defence force are covered.

Australian Airborne also includes a comprehensive collection of photographs showing personnel, incidents, equipment, badges and assorted parachuting paraphernalia; and detailed lists of participants in various units and operations. The book also features many interesting anecdotes and individual accounts of the development of military parachuting in Australia, unblemished by stories that might otherwise be seen as romantic or nostalgic. Material has been researched and sourced from a broad spectrum within the parachuting community, resulting in a generally credible record.

Photographs are presented in quality high-colour format and are generally well laid out and captioned (although several personal names are misspelt). While the book is indexed appropriately, it could perhaps have had a more comprehensive index system where all information can be referenced from the back of the book, rather than have so much background information contained at the end of each chapter. The graphic design of the book, while quite professional, makes it look somewhat like a text book, an aspect also heightened by its size, thickness and weight. The appearance of any future editions would perhaps benefit from some improvement in the layout and graphic design. Putting the 'text book' appearance aside, it is a suitable coffee table presentation or gift for anyone with a more than usual interest in Australia's military past.

Australian Airborne is a rich source of information and a thoroughly interesting read for the Australian military parachuting community – past, present and future. The author has independently published this book, which is quite a feat given the standard achieved. He is to be congratulated for the effort. ♦

John O'Connor, *Australian Airborne: The History and Insignia of Australian Military Parachuting*, published by John O'Connor, Marrickville, 2005, Hardcover, 440pp., 2.7kg, RRP \$A75.00 (plus \$A9 Australian postage if ordered from PO Box 454, Kingsgrove, NSW, 1480, or joc44@bigpond.net.au).

