

The Spirit of the Digger: Then & Now

Patrick Lindsay

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

In my teenage years, I began a life-long interest in military history. In doing so I was, at first, alarmed and concerned that in the big fat books about the Boer War, World War I and World War II there seemed to be very little evidence of any significant role played by Australia. General Ludendorff, Commander of the Germany forces in World War I, devoted only one brief comment to the ANZAC forces. This was something of a shock, given that his work was made up of two fat volumes.

In contrast to the neglect of Australia in the big histories produced by British and European historians, it was reassuring to dive into the massive detail of the official histories of Australia's involvement in the two major wars. Bean's efforts to celebrate the incomparable qualities of the digger caught me up and was, in part, a motive for me to join the Australian Army. Being a 'digger' and an officer tempered these idealistic views. It is important to bring, to any major attempt to define and describe the phenomena of Australian military service, the tests of empirical realism and unsentimental evaluation. It is with this approach that I review this book.

The central thesis of Lindsay's study is that regardless of the circumstances the Australian soldier, or 'digger', has remained the same. He argues that there is an unbroken continuation of fundamental characteristics and qualities that were first made manifest at Gallipoli, the Somme and Ypres, which have been exhibited by all the Australian troops who served in North Africa, New Guinea, Korea, Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Lindsay has collected an impressive range of vignettes and quotations drawn from interviews of officers and men. He claims that this material supports, or perhaps, proves his assertion that there is a unique nature to the Australian digger. He argues that the particular 'spirit of the digger' is acquired in the raw material of the recruit, and then developed through the additions of thorough training, good leadership and the dynamics of operational experience. Moreover, he seeks to demonstrate, through the selective review of various campaigns, battles and operations, that the unique 'spirit of the digger' has been unchangingly exhibited on all occasions.

In historic, sociological and military terms, this is a brave, if not foolhardy exercise. It is not this reviewer's intent to diminish the long-term reputation and achievements of the members of the various Australian armies and forces that have served the nation so well for over a century. It is, however, important to make scholarly appraisals of what we have achieved and to be honest about our weaknesses and failures.

The primary weakness in the many attempts to demonstrate the unique qualities of an Australian 'universal soldier' or 'amateur warrior', so assiduously crafted by Bean in his history of the First AIF, is that the claim ignores the members of the navy and the air force. The extension of the digger qualities and martial experiences to these arms does not provide a satisfactory fit. Lindsay makes no convincing attempt to deal

with this major issue. He notes that large numbers of Australians volunteered and served in the RAAF and RAF but fails to show how their behaviour in the various air campaigns exhibits the qualities of the 'digger'.

Equally, the nature of Australian naval service is very different to that of the various armies Australia has raised. It is fair to say that there has always been the common basis of the contemporary Australian experience and social ethos in the three armed services. It is important, however, to note that each has always had its special nature, its own battle honours, its own forms, rituals and modes of conduct. Over the last hundred years our armed forces, have been recognised by others as being distinctly Australian, but the RAN and the RAAF have also been seen to be more technocratic and more like the RN and the RAF.

The central difficulty with Lindsay's thesis is that he attempts to make an absolutist case, for a very long-run phenomenon, which involves sustained and continuous change. The book is far too dependent upon selective use of evidence and reporting, and fails to deal with the long-run evidence that does not fit the author's conclusion.

The book covers a vast sweep of Australian military history and too often uses statements that require qualification, ranging from the minor detail through to almost total revision. There are too many occasions where the author accepts 'received public knowledge' as if it were proven evidence. There are numerous sloppy assertions, such as 60,000 Timorese killed by the Japanese, two-thirds of 100,000 volunteers wanting to join the RAAF, the use of Russia when discussing the Soviet Union; and exaggerated claims such as an Australian success in North Africa was the key to turning the war around. These all undermine his case.

The book is full of examples where the author seeks to make his case by using comparisons, which are, in fact, cases of comparing unlike events. The context, nature and magnitude of the events compared are too often different. One of the most alarming aspects, of a commendable attempt to identify a very elusive aspect of our history, is the repeated misleading interpretations given to events. This ranges from the too ready acceptance of the comment given in an interview, to the lack of discussion of counter evidence.

The treatment in many places is ahistorical. Lindsay provides no adequate evaluation of unlawful behaviour by Australian troops, the murder of officers and NCOs in Vietnam, or the combat failure of units in various campaigns.

The members of the RAN, RAAF, and the men and women 'diggers' of today are part of a long-run tradition, which explicitly seeks to have them internalise key values and national myths. It is the blend of tradition, myth, training and experience, which forms the 'unit spirit' of the various branches of our armed forces at any time and in any particular circumstance. There is nothing absolute or unchanging about our military ethos. It is composed of differing forms, which, in different situations, may bring our nation shame or glory. Australia has been well served by the men and women of our armed forces, and we might be wise, to pray and work hard to ensure that each generation produces those who will put mate and duty first. ♦

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