

Other People's Wars: A History of Australian Peacekeeping

Peter Londey

Reviewed by Neil James

This reviewer must declare several interests in this excellent book so his review can be judged objectively. First I am thanked in the preface and was thanked at its launch. Second, in the late 1990s I was one of only two uniformed members on the Army Military History Projects Committee which encouraged and partly funded the research involved. This became something of a running joke between us over the years as to why he was taking so long to finish it.

Dr Peter Londey, a longstanding member of the Military History Section of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), has been recently appointed to the team writing the official histories of peacekeeping and post-Cold War operations. Normally a summary history would follow not precede the publishing of the official histories, but this by no means detracts from this book's authority or relevance. The ADF and AFP in particular have long needed such a summary account, both to record their long and complex service in many missions, and to counter the numerous myths and misapprehensions concerning peacekeeping still held in some political and bureaucratic circles.

During 1989–90 I managed the Army Headquarters operations room in Canberra. This was the period when the Army first began deploying formed units overseas in multinational peacekeeping operations, and indeed for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War 17 years before. During the planning and day-to-day supervision of such operations AHQ was bombarded with questions from ministerial, bureaucratic and general quarters about the history of the ADF's involvement in peacekeeping.

No historical accounts existed. The then Army Historian was absolutely no help and showed no interest. I ended up preparing a ministerial brief that later metamorphosed into *Australian Defence Force Journal* articles in 1990 and 1994, a chapter in the proceedings of the 1993 Chief of Army Exercise, and later again into the relevant Army and ADF doctrinal manuals.

The basic problem in the 1980s and early 1990s was a familiar one in Australian military and social history. Beginning with World War II, each succeeding group of veterans has been regarded by the preceding generation as 'having not been in a real war'. In the case of peacekeeping operations, the Vietnam veteran generation, then totally dominant among the Army's senior ranks, were quite ignorant as to their nature and sceptical about their value, not least because peacekeeping did not appear to involve combat and had been mainly undertaken by Army Reserve individuals in the 1950–1974 period. This resulted in three serious problems. First, the ADF and Army possessed no coherent doctrinal

vision on where peacekeeping fitted in the spectrum of conflict. Second, there was no doctrine on how it should be conducted and this translated into numerous command, planning, training, equipment procurement, logistic and welfare difficulties. Third, the Army leadership saw no value in such operations in terms of operational capability maintenance or the development of its leaders in challenging command positions. One Chief-of-Operations even stated that we would never bid for a UN command position while he had anything to do with it, and that Kangaroo series exercises offered far better value.

Dr Londey, who had joined the AWM in 1991, had no background in this area until appointed to stage the memorial's first peacekeeping exhibition in 1993. *Other People's Wars* is the product of his long involvement, interest and intellectual engagement in the subject ever since. If only a book such as this had been written 20 years ago.

Other People's Wars is very well written, structured and argued. It begins with a short, clear and balanced explanation of what peacekeeping is and probably isn't, how it has evolved, how it fits into the wider spectrum of conflict, and how the ADF's approach to it is firmly grounded in the Australian way of war. Peacekeeping is a definitional minefield and this introduction adroitly avoids the two common pitfalls of the amateur ideologue regarding peacekeeping, which are to mouth the platitudes that impartiality of motive and neutrality of force application are synonymous, and that *all* peacekeeping *always* requires the consent of *all* belligerent parties. The rest of this highly readable book is mainly organised into 14 chapters covering the various peacekeeping commitments in both chronological order and by region. Each individual operation is succinctly described with judicious and often penetrating use of participant quotes, documentary sources, and comments on both the historical and contemporary issues involved.

Finally, the book ends with a seven-page conclusion of pithy observations and insights on the expectations, benefits and failures of peacekeeping. The maps are clear and support understanding of the text, there are five pages of the numerous acronyms and abbreviations that litter peacekeeping, 14 pages of notes arranged by chapter, six pages of sources and an efficient 19-page index. *Other People's Wars* is a credit to its author and publisher and augers well for the standard of the forthcoming official histories. ♦

Peter Londey, *'Other People's Wars: A History of Australian Peacekeeping'*, Allen&Unwin, Crow's Nest NSW, 2004, Softback, 312pp., RRP \$35.00.

