

# Defending the unprepared

Peter Ryan

When Australian really get stuck into fighting a war, few nations do it better. The valour and effectiveness of our fighting men are acknowledged, and most acknowledged where it matters most — by their enemies who meet them on the battlefield. That is, after we have properly got stuck into it, which is usually about two years after the conflict began.

During that ‘warm-up’ period, we are likely to get belted up all over the place, suffering defeats, withdrawals, brave stands to the last man, and the futile death and maiming of thousands of the best young men of that generation.

These disastrous starts are our own fault, because we’d rather think about the footy than the future. ‘She’ll be right, mate! She’s apples! is not too cruel a caricature of Australia’s traditional approach to foreign policy and defence.

Why do we go on acting though the world were a safe and friendly place? Or as if the envy, cruelty, greed and violence that are part of essential human nature have softened over the last few thousand years? They haven’t, of course; every front page and every television screen daily spread before our eyes the compelling and repellent evidence that the Old Adam (and the Old Eve) are continuing to replicate the inexorable pattern of their genes.

Some of those few who bother to think at all about defence find it all too hard: ‘What’s the use?’ Here we are, a small power, balanced over the edge of a vast cauldron of unpredictable Pacific instability — we’re beaten even before the balloon goes up.’

This view is as dim as it is demeaning. History tells us of many small, tough-nut nations which have maintained their integrity for centuries simply by being formidably armed and trained. What about Sweden and Switzerland? In ordinary life, bullies rarely attack the little kid who is known to be capable of inflicting a nasty black eye or blood nose before he goes under.

And the converse is true: Nothing tempts aggression more than the spectacle of weakness.

It may be a cruel paradox, but military weakness tends to be a product of democracy, the polity which

we would all, in the end, fight to preserve. But an electorate ever greedy for free health, free education, free welfare is naturally against money being spent on guns.

With their exquisitely tuned ears for the cracked note of a lost vote, our politicians of all parties connive at the decayed state of our national defence. If the price of unpreparedness has to be paid in the blood of young soldiers — well, sorry about that, but at least it’s better than our party having lost the last election.

In the threatening circumstances of today, we should all send our leaders regular reminders of the biting lines of Kipling, whose own son died fighting in the Irish Guards in the First World War. Kipling wrote of a then lately dead political figure:

*I could not dig: I dared not rob:  
Therefore I lied to please the mob.  
Now all my lies are proved untrue  
And I must face the men I slew.  
What tale shall serve me here among  
Mine angry and defrauded young?*

Australia, comfortably set up with one of the highest standards of living in the world, spends a contemptible 1.8 per cent of its gross domestic product on defence, and makes itself an international joke.

These sombre thoughts were provoked by news of the retirement — or semi-retirement — of Michael O’Connor, national executive director of the Australia Defence Association. That admirably voluntary organisation is itself a case study in the virtues of democracy, where citizens may freely come together to promote any lawful objective which to them seems important. The ADA may be a special case of this, because it does not promote simply fringe enthusiasms like mid-winter surfing or steam railways. Its concern is the continuing life of our nation.

The Association was formed at a fateful turning of the hinge of our strategic history — the fall of Saigon in 1975. Its prime movers were three West Australians — a retired air marshal, a director of a chamber of commerce, and the secretary of a trade union. That odd

assortment — as some may think it — is a further pointer to the virtues of democracy: under our system, a true concern for the country's future can bridge all manner of differences of class, background and economic interest.

The choice of Michael O'Connor as national executive director in 1981 was inspired. As a former naval officer he understood the niceties (and nasties) of Service life, protocol and prejudice; as a retired 'kiap' from Papua New Guinea he had mastered the task of what the great Sir Hubert Murray called 'the outside man' — the poor devil away 'out there' who, against which 'head office' can invent, somehow makes the system work in the field.

As an author, O'Connor has shown the wisdom, vision and intellect required to analyse and expound larger ideas. His book *To Live in Peace* described in plain language where Australia's national defences stood on the eve of the twenty-first century, and suggested what we might do about it. The book so impressed retired Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck that he made a special trip from Perth to Melbourne to launch it for the old Melbourne University Press.

Hasluck and O'Connor had met once before, in what was almost another world, when Mike was in charge of a God-forsaken patrol post deep in the swamps of the Fly River. Hasluck overnighted with him in the bush when making one of his inspections as Minister for Territories. To O'Connor, this long remained one of the best night's conversations he had ever enjoyed, and I mentioned the fact to Hasluck when I wrote inviting him to do the launching. His formal note of acceptance carried two handwritten, dry lines at the foot: 'Don't tell the author this, but when you've been at Kiunga for a while, any conversation might seem good'.

One of the ADA's most useful accomplishments is its journal, *Defender*. This plainly written, no-nonsense quarterly leads us through the gobbledygook jungles of government white papers, strategic reviews, ministerial statements and departmental handouts. And if you seek enlightenment on whether our new Collins-class submarines are any good; on what is happening in Taiwan; or what the breakdown of civil government in Papua New Guinea might portend for Australia's strategic comfort — read *Defender*.

I confess that I turn first, each quarter, to the page contributed by Major Furphy, the wide-eyed innocent who is staff officer to Air Marshal Barney Stoush, Vice Chief of the Defence Force. Like Hans Andersen's child asking about the emperor's new clothes, Furphy artlessly lifts the gold braid, and gives us glimpses of the high-ranking humans underneath it. How does Major Furphy get away with it? My fear is that, when I open *Defender* one day, Furphy will at least have gone too far, and Stoush will have had him court-martialled.

I am of the dwindling generation which recalls at first hand Gull Force, Sparrow Force and Lark Force, 'penny-packets' of men (as our Chief of the General

Staff called them) scattered through the island chains to oppose the Japanese juggernaut of 1942. Lost, almost to a man, I remember the gallant 39 Battalion, teenagers rushed to stem the enemy at Kokoda. The first modern machine gun, they ever saw was delivered to them on the track, where they had to unpack it and work out how it operated.

Do we have to face all this again, perhaps in only a few years time? The answer is Yes, undoubtedly we do, unless an informed and resolute electorate insists that their government (of whatever persuasion) accepts the basic burden of rulers — that they are there to provide the safety of the people. If they fail in that, nothing else counts. The doctrine of *Salus populi suprema est lex* was already old when Cicero pronounced it in ancient Rome.

*Editor's note: Peter Ryan's article has been reproduced courtesy of 'Quadrant' and is reprinted here as part of our tribute to Mike O'Connor on his retirement. The results are also testimony to the respect 'Quadrant' readers hold for Peter, as it has brought new subscriptions for 'Defender' at the rate of at least one per day.'*

*As most 'Defender' readers do not read 'Cicero' in the original, if at all, the translation from the Latin is 'the safety of the people is the supreme law'.*

**The Army is not like a limited liability company, to be reconstructed, remodelled, liquidated and refloated from week to week as the money market fluctuates.**

**It is not an inanimate thing, like a house, to be pulled down or enlarged or structurally altered at the caprice of the tenant or owner; it is a living thing.**

**If it is bullied, it sulks; if it is unhappy it pines; if it is harried it gets feverish; if it is sufficiently disturbed, it will wither and dwindle and almost die; and when it comes to this last serious condition, it is only revived by lots of time and lots of money.**

**Winston Churchill, Daily Mail,  
17 December 1904.**