

Redcoats to Cams: A History of Australian Infantry 1788 to 2001

Ian Kuring

Reviewed by Neil James

Ian Kuring's *Redcoats to Cams* is first of all, but not only, a labour of love by an infantryman paying tribute to his trade. It recounts the story of the contribution of infantry to Australian military, and wider history, and pays a detailed tribute to the trade at the very heart of past, present and future soldiering. The author, an infantryman, served as a regular soldier 1965–2001 then transferred to the Army Reserve to serve with the Army History Unit. *Redcoats to Cams* began its gestation in 1996. The then commanding officer of the School of Infantry, Jim Dittmar, very much a soldier in both the intellectual and practical traditions, commissioned a booklet to be used in giving trainee infantrymen of all ranks some idea of the history of their trade, and the many lessons learnt the hard way in numerous battles. Ian Kuring, an ex-curator of the Infantry Corps Museum, was the ideal man for the task. Ian had the passion, the interest, the research and writing abilities and, just as importantly, the ability to get on with all ranks and types.

In the late 1990s, the Army History Unit took over the low-cost project and expanded it into a reference book, because there was a growing realisation that such a work deserved, and would interest, a far wider readership. This book is testimony to the superb work of the unit in managing the continued recording of our military heritage, and the continuing need to nourish the intellectual aspects of the profession of arms. *Redcoats to Cams* was largely based on mining secondary sources (the bibliography is 19 pages) because there was insufficient money available to fund original research. This throws an interesting sidelight on Army priorities.

As well as its worth as a reference—and it will be regarded as a major one—this is a very readable book with fresh and expressive prose. The technical and sometimes arcane jargon of soldiering is translated into everyday language. Even when you dip into it in search of a specific detail you find yourself drawn into reading on and on.

The structure of the book is particularly well thought out to provide a superb and easily searched and understood reference resource. Fourteen chapters cover the activities of our infantry from 1788 to 2001. Two further chapters look into the future of the infantry and offer some reflections respectively. Many of the chapters include useful tables of the units involved in the operations discussed. Maps and photos are cleverly used to impart information not just to decorate the text.

The 69 pages of appendices provide excellent coverage of background detail on battle honours lists, Victoria Cross winners, the organisational structure of infantry battalions over the years and the reasons the structures changed, a list of common infantry acronyms and abbreviations, establishment (wiring) diagrams for every type of infantry unit over the whole period, a superb summary of the different types of infantry unit, the badges of the various infantry regiments, and a detailed list of the tables, maps and photographs included in the book. This is supported by 14 pages of indexes, broken up by Australian units and formations, other country's formations, weapons and equipment, and general entries.

The chapter covering the 1972–2001 period in particular includes some perceptive and pithy comments on the various reorganisations and reorientations of the Army over the period, the transition difficulties with training, training areas, equipment and doctrine, and the effect of peacekeeping missions and overseas exercises during a time of relative peace. Kuring is particularly good on the troubles the infantry (and the ADF as a whole) endured throughout the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s in trying to meet the often inconsistent, or less than coherent, strategic guidance set down by various governments with the insufficient and often unsuitable equipment that was made available.

His chapter on the future of the infantry is brief but workmanlike and a good summary of the problems to be faced in equipment, doctrine and tactics. Kuring's final chapter, 'Reflections', should be compulsory reading for every academic strategist, civilian bureaucrat, journalist, media columnist and politician before they even think about how the infantry (and the ADF) should ever be employed.

Australian infantry, and indeed the Australian Army, punch above their weight and have generally always had to. There are few armies in the world that can produce infantry warrant officers like Ian Kuring—men who approach their trade practically but who can also see the value in studying and understanding the past in order to fight even better in the future. *Redcoats to Cams* is a superb reference work. It is a credit to its author, publisher, original sponsor, the Army History Unit and all those known and unknown staff officers and commanders who supported its production, because they understood that the profession of arms requires intellectual succour and public recognition as well as practical excellence.

While the book is too big and heavy to carry in an infantryman's basic pouch, it is not too heavy to be used cleverly by any thinking infantryman. ♦

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