

A Different Sort of War: Australians in Korea 1950-53

Richard Trembath

Reviewed by Professor Peter Edwards

The central word in many a conference or seminar of professional historians these days is 'memory'. Why is it that some events and episodes enter the collective memory of a nation, while others do not? Why do we erect monuments or hold commemoration ceremonies to ensure that some individuals, small groups or large cohorts are remembered by later generations, while some others might be overlooked?

Nowhere is this process more obvious, or more sensitive, than when one is dealing with wars and their place in Australia's national history. Institutions such as the Australian War Memorial and the Shrine of Remembrance have a central place in our national life, and the most solemn phrases uttered there include 'We will remember them' and 'Lest we forget'.

Nothing, it seems, matters more to those who risk life and limb in the nation's cause than that their service and sacrifice should be remembered. Equally, nothing hurts more than the thought that they might be forgotten. It has long been a cliché to describe the conflict in Korea between 1950 and 1953 as 'the forgotten war', a phrase frequently used not only in Australia but also in many others of the 16 nations that formed the United Nations coalition.

This book might well have been called 'remembering the forgotten war'. Based on a doctoral thesis, it discusses the place of the Korean War in Australian national memory. Richard Trembath sees three broad areas of tension that gave rise to ambivalence about the significance of the war, and of Australian participation in it. They are 'Korea's place as a conflict within the wider Cold War, Korea as a component of the Australian military tradition and Korea's presence within the collective memory'.

Trembath does not cover in great detail the military operations in which the Australians were engaged, or their political and diplomatic context, including the negotiation of the ANZUS Treaty. These topics were covered comprehensively in the two volumes of the magisterial official history by Robert O'Neill. Trembath's first two chapters summarise these stories. They serve as a useful synopsis for those who have neither the time nor the inclination to read O'Neill's large volumes, as well as the essential foundation for the subsequent discussion.

The third chapter looks at the opponents and critics of the war – or more precisely, of Australia's commitment. In many accounts, including those written by historians sympathetic to anti-war dissent, this period is passed over quickly. There is nothing like the drama associated with either the 1914-18 war or Vietnam, but there are nevertheless some points worth making in discussing Australia's early involvement in the Cold War.



The most original work comes in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, where much of the discussion is based on questionnaires that Trembath sent to ex-Servicemen, probing their recollections and attitudes. The sub-titles of these chapters best indicate their focus: 'The formation of K-Force', 'Australian soldiers consider their role in the Korean war', and 'The Korean war in private and public memory'. Based largely on the recollections of those who served, these chapters discuss the Servicemen's contemporary attitudes and later reflections. Why did they enlist in K-Force? What did they think of their allies, their enemies, and the Korean people, both civilian and military? Do they think that their service, and the loss of 339 of their comrades, was worthwhile? Is it true that Australian participation in the Korean War has been unjustly neglected in our collective memory? If so, why? How much has been remedied in recent years, with the erection of the Australian National Korean War Memorial in Canberra and the issuing of the Australian Active Service Medal 1945-1975 with the clasp 'Korea'?

In discussing these themes, and the answers to his questionnaires, Trembath has mastered a great deal of academic debate over memory and related themes, while making his own points in generally clear and jargon-free prose. Perhaps inevitably, the book emphasises the experience of soldiers far more than that of sailors or airmen (although that pillar of the ex-Service community in Melbourne, Dacre Smyth, makes a cameo appearance as a young naval lieutenant). The book is generally well produced, although the numbering of footnotes in Chapter 1 seems to have gone a little awry.

This is not a book for those who are looking for a detailed account of military operations or a rhetorical tribute to service and sacrifice. But it is an interesting and valuable discussion of the place of the Korean War in Australian memory. In its own understated way, it provides a respectful and effective tribute to that service. ♦

Richard Trembath, 'A Different Sort of War: Australians in Korea 1950-53', Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005, Softback, xxiv + 266 pp., RRP \$A34.95.

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