

# The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History

Edited by Peter Dennis, Jeffrey Grey, Ewan Morris and Robin Prior with Jean Bou

Reviewed by Neil James

The first edition of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* was published in 1995 towards the end of the nearly three decades of peace that followed our withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1972. Given that the period since 1999 has seen our defence force the busiest it has been since at least the early 1960s, this second edition includes most welcome updates of the last 13 years.

This second edition with 1200 entries (50 of them thematic) is 58 pages shorter, almost entirely due to the removal of the photographs, but the pages are slightly bigger and the quality of the paper and readability much improved. Many of the existing entries have been updated, there are many new ones, and the alphabetical heart of the companion has been reorganised in an even more logical fashion.

This companion is intended to assist research and point you to further reading if required. It is also great for just dipping and picking up outline knowledge of unfamiliar areas of our naval, military and air force history.

In keeping with the consistent integrity of the companion, the thematic entry *Aboriginal resistance to white invasion* has been renamed *frontier wars* and now includes a good summary of the continuing historiographical controversy in this area. There is also an informative new thematic entry on *Aboriginal traditional warfare*.

The updating is mostly accurate but the odd inconsistency occurs. The list of peacekeeping operations includes several humanitarian assistance missions so either the title or the contents need to be tweaked. Some entries, however, remain confusing in their titling or in their conceptual or academic execution.

Given the particular importance of the topic generally, one unusually large thematic entry, *Strategic debate in Australia 1945-2005*, is very disappointing in this regard. It is instead only a marginal rewrite of Coral Bell's 1995 entry *Strategic debate in the nuclear age, Australian contributions to*, a quite different topic. The entry mainly comprises debates about the academic discipline of strategic studies, both internationally and nationally, with whole pages then devoted to a potted history of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at the ANU.

Left unmentioned is the substance of the fundamentally important and continuing debates about Australian defence strategy in the 1945-2005 period (why not 2008, incidentally). Where limited aspects are mentioned this is incomplete, sometimes inaccurate and reflects an SDSC-centric and somewhat cosy perspective from academia, rather than a broader appreciation of what actually occurred and why. A particularly one-sided and certainly out-of-touch claim is even repeated from the first edition:

The policy-makers in the armed forces [sic] as well in the bureaucracy have sometimes been irritated by the theorists, regarding them as people who rock the boat,

push the debate in unwanted directions, and reveal matters it is inconvenient to have exposed.

The point is not made that experienced practitioners of strategy and its execution by operations might also object because some theories are simply impractical or invalid. Similarly ignored is that those in control of Department of Defence strategic policymaking for a long period in the late 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, were by origin or temperament academic theorists – with results regarded as at least controversial by most and disastrous by many.

There is no mention either of the excellent contributions to debate by the Australian Defence Studies Centre at ADFA throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the major contributions by the Navy, Army and Air Force think-tanks over the last decade in particular, or even the ADA's small but steady input since 1975. Oddly, the armed neutrality ideas of David Martin are given a few words, but not that his tiny Armed Neutrality Association disbanded in 1992 through lack of interest, support and influence.

The contribution of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) since 2001 cracks a single penultimate paragraph. Even then ASPI's creation is attributed to '... a sense among political leaders ... that a body rather more directly oriented to immediate policy issues than the SDSC ... would be desirable'. This may be partly true but completely overlooks the widespread view at the time and since, including elsewhere in academia and indeed by some within the centre itself, that SDSC had become moribund and effectively irrelevant to national strategic debate.

Finally, it is surely strange, in a history companion, for an entry on this topic to omit the long and productive efforts by Professor David Horner of the SDSC, and Dr Michael Evans of the Army, to record and discuss the various schools of Australian strategic thought and the historical cycles underlying debates over strategic policy.

The companion's 45 maps, 17 explanatory tables and four lists remain highly useful. The comprehensive appendices listing key military, ministerial and bureaucratic officeholders since federation omit the commanders of the Naval and military forces before 1911 and 1909 respectively and this should be corrected in future editions. There is also now a 13-page index, a much needed aid to cross-referencing absent from the first edition.

If you maintain even the most basic interest in, or library of, Australian military history then you need to obtain this new edition of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*. It is also a valuable tool for anyone researching or commenting on Australian defence matters and would be a particularly helpful reference on the desk of any journalist or columnist seeking to do so. ♦

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