

Cosgrove: Portrait of a Leader

Patrick Lindsay

Reviewed by Neil James

General Peter Cosgrove deserves a considered biography eventually but this book is not it. A balanced account of Cosgrove's contribution to the ADF cannot be written at this stage. It is far too early, for example, to measure either his achievements or possible failures as Chief of Defence Force (CDF) during a period of major strategic upheaval and high operational tempo for the ADF.

An effective biography of a senior military figure needs a biographer capable of researching, understanding and writing about complex military and politico-strategic matters. *Portrait of a Leader* is instead an outline sketch and one where the crayon was applied in a particularly slapdash fashion regarding facts, nomenclature and insight. The transcription of recorded interviews (obviously few in number and limited in range) and the overall editing is appalling. Readers with any military experience are inexorably drawn to counting the numerous factual howlers and misinterpretations that litter the book. Ranks and appointments of various people are often recorded incorrectly. Unit titles are usually more wrong than right and 5RAR somehow fought in Korea and has battle honours for Long Tan. My favourite was that battalion commanders gave *audits* not *orders* groups. In a similar anti-gravitas vein Cosgrove is called *Cos* throughout.

Officers do not normally reach command of the Army or become CDF if prone to torture by self-doubt and Peter Cosgrove was no exception. He also arrived there almost by accident (as others have), following his highly prominent command of Australia's complex and nuanced intervention in East Timor during 1999-2000. The ill-prepared and under-resourced ADF was committed after much diplomatic and strategic bungling. Our eventual muddling through without a war with Indonesia owes much to behind-the-scenes US pressure on that country. Cosgrove's professionalism and effectiveness as commander of the forces so hurriedly deployed also played a large part, particularly in public, but one ably supported by loyal and capable headquarters staff, the troops under his command and much effort generally throughout the ADF. Even from the command viewpoint it was not a Cosgrove triumph alone. The strategic-level contribution of Admiral Chris Barrie as CDF, for example, was perhaps just as important but is much less known.

As this book relates but often only sparingly, Peter Cosgrove is a complex man. Part of his public success in East Timor was due to his ability to articulate his operational vision and calmly demonstrate the resolve behind it to audiences of all kinds (he was perhaps less certain in this regard when CDF). Several of his peers believe, probably wrongly in most cases, that they could have done as well or better. Such 'what ifs' are really irrelevant because Cosgrove was the lucky one of his generation who was the right man in the right command at 1st Division at the right time.

The best chapter in the book is the first one, recounting Cosgrove's experiences as a platoon commander in the Vietnam War – where he was awarded the Military Cross

in October 1969. The second chapter, relating his early years and family circumstances is also sympathetically written. After that the author must have got tired.

The worst chapter, about Cosgrove's involvement with Lieutenant Colonel Lance Collins (his senior intelligence officer before and during East Timor), exemplifies the book's lack of depth and obvious omissions. Lindsay correctly notes that Collins was eventually

vindicated in detail, years afterward, about his most serious complaint. This involved ill-informed and dangerous civilian bureaucratic meddling in military command matters concerning intelligence support to the force Cosgrove commanded in the field. He also accurately records that the original and continuing cover-ups meant incorrect advice was later given to Cosgrove, by then CDF, resulting in the Minister and Cosgrove declaring publicly that Collins was wrong. This resulted in serious and long-lasting damage to Collins' reputation, career and marriage. Cosgrove is widely considered to have let Collins down badly, especially when CDF, and the complete absence of discussion on this point underlines the overall shallowness of this book. Interestingly, Cosgrove's recent autobiography, *My Story*, also does not address this issue at all (being a sparse and selective account largely confined to the original incident in East Timor only).

Now whether Cosgrove is capable of selective loyalty downwards, or was more or less so than his peers, is a valid subject that should be explored in any serious biography. But other meaty issues are also entirely absent including whether Cosgrove could be somewhat idle at times, whether being Australian of the Year unduly diverted his attention from his duties as Chief of Army, and why he apparently insisted that Peter Leahy – in many ways chalk to his cheese – succeed him in that position. Many also wonder why he allowed the new DMO to abruptly replace the scientifically-qualified and respected general heading Land Systems Division (a Duntroon classmate) with a public servant.

The meatiest question left unaddressed is whether Cosgrove, as the highest-profile CDF ever, wasted this public status and the confidence the Government expressed in him by not forcefully pushing for thorough reform of the Department of Defence, the command structure of the ADF and Australia's flawed politico-military strategic interface generally.

Portrait of a Leader outlines a brief and largely uncritical account of Peter Cosgrove's antecedents, achievements and character. It is of little value to those seeking a proper in-depth biography of a man who undoubtedly deserves one. ♦

Patrick Lindsay, *'Cosgrove: Portrait of a Leader'*, Random House, Sydney, 2006, Softback, 289pp., RRP \$434.95

