

# Duty First: A History of the Royal Australian Regiment

Edited by David Horner and Jean Bou

Reviewed by Chris Appleton

In the 60<sup>th</sup> year of the Royal Australian Regiment this updating of its history revises aspects of the 1990 edition and adds two new chapters: *Upheaval Uncertainty and Opportunity UN Operations and Australia 1990-1999* by Craig Stockings and *Near and Far Operations 1999-2006* by John Blaxland. The revision of the original chapters covering 1965-69 reflects new information and recent research, particularly that stemming from the subsequently published volumes of the Official History of the Vietnam War. Once again this book is edited by former infantryman, Vietnam veteran and renowned military historian, Professor David Horner, but this time ably assisted by former cavalryman and historian, Dr Jean Bou.

Constrained by the publisher's insistence that the new edition be no longer than the last, the coverage of the regiment's near continuous series of operations since 1991 has necessarily demanded brevity over breadth by the authors and editors. This period includes operations in Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda, the various iterations of Timor, Iraq, Solomons, Tonga, and Afghanistan. The tempo of recent operations is exemplified by the fact that in 2006 each of the six commanding officers of the regiment deployed with at least part of their battalion. The recent strategic need to raise two new battalions (splitting 5/7RAR once again into 5RAR and 7RAR and the re-raising of 8/9 RAR) is a sure sign that this tempo is expected to continue.

A factual and practical account of the regiment's achievements in the spare prose favoured by soldiers, this volume is true to the style of the first edition. Four new short pieces: the father and son experiences of Barry and John Caligari covering most of the 60 years of the Regiment's history, Alan Gilman's experiences from Singleton trainee to RSM, *All the linked battalions* by Simon Gould, and reflections on operations and command at different levels by Lieutenant General David Hurley, add a valuable and distinctly personal touch to the work of the historians. David Hurley's account of soldiering in 1RAR in the late 1970s – beset by chronic undermanning and ageing equipment – is a particularly sobering reminder that 'the good old days' seldom were. And that the regiment today is immeasurably better manned, trained equipped, and resourced than it was during 'the Long Peace.'

As a history, however, this volume has limitations beyond those of length imposed by the publisher. Most significant is the pale account of 4RAR operations in Afghanistan in 2006. The bland few pages do no justice to the most intense

fighting done by the regiment since 4RAR was last in action in 1971. The limitations imposed by Special Forces security requirements are draconian and deprive the regiment and the nation of a story of courage and achievement deserving of our knowledge, pride and respect. This sparse treatment is in stark contrast to the detail attended upon almost every patrol clash and significant incident by the battalions of the regiment serving in East Timor.

This volume, as regimental histories are wont, does not address the longstanding challenges faced by the regiment in retaining its people. The strength of the regiment's warrant officers and NCOs as the touchstone of its professionalism is properly and proudly acknowledged. That the regiment has such a cadre is testament to the quality of the humble infantryman given that the majority of soldiers do not serve beyond their initial four-year engagement.

Perhaps properly, this history avoids politics. However, it is difficult to see the 1996 termination of the successful Ready Reserve Scheme (as implemented in 6RAR and 8/9 RAR) as other than a poor decision by the newly elected government of the day. The result was a less capable regiment until Timor in 1999 and the demands of deployed operations gave the regiment a new impetus and priority.

The regiment's efforts at organisational development are well addressed, the development of high-readiness parachute, commando, mechanised and amphibious capabilities reflecting well on the modern regiment and the Army. Significantly, the structure of the infantry battalion today (less the commando battalion, 4RAR) is little different from that of the battalions of Korea. Efforts underway now to determine the best structure to fight, command and support an infantry battalion, and to best exploit the great array of new equipment and 'enablers' available, will be central to the regiment's continued success.

The laconic manner and dry wit of the Australian regular infantryman conceals the fact that for many, service in the regiment evokes deep, near spiritual sentiments. This theme pervades the eleven 'individual views' by men of all ranks. As Brian Betts, a veteran of Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam records, 'my fondest memory is my service in the Royal Australian Regiment. Given my life to live again, I would do it all over and enjoy it just as much.'

This updated volume, a story of courage, humour, professionalism and dedication to duty. It is a proper and fitting tribute to the many thousands of mostly young men who, over the past 60 years, have served the Royal Australian Regiment and the nation in war and peace with such great distinction – by putting duty first. ♦

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