

Introduction: Fighting Australia's Cold War

For two decades after the end of the Second World War, Australia actively sought to ensure its security through the deployment of its forces at home and abroad. While the Australian military had drastically shrunk in size after 1945, during the 1950s and 1960s it was persistently engaged in conflict, while simultaneously preparing for the possibility of a broader world conflagration. Indeed, there was no time in the two decades after the Second World War in which Australian forces were not deployed overseas. After contributing to the occupation of Japan from 1945, only five years after the Second World War Australia was again engaged in conflict, in support of its allies in Korea and in the form of aircraft in support of Commonwealth operations in the Malayan Emergency. In 1955, Australia committed ground forces to the Emergency to form a part of the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR) alongside Britain and New Zealand. It was from the forces serving with FESR that Australia deployed to a third conflict against Indonesia in Borneo. While these three conflicts marked the clearest examples of Australia's efforts to maintain its security during the early Cold War, between these deployments the country also prepared to fight wider conflicts and maintained vigilance at home against internal threats. These preparations were not trivial commitments: they dominated the allocation of resources, shaped training and framed force structure. Moreover, the threats for which Australian prepared during this period were not abstract ones but were instead considered likely and highly dangerous.

While Australia fought in four conflicts during the Cold War, and prepared for others, the history of this period is dominated by the war in Vietnam, on which so much of the public memory focuses. That war is at the forefront of public imagining of the period after the Second World War, and was the catalyst and symbol for many social, political

and strategic shifts of that era. The strong focus on Vietnam relative to other Cold War conflicts is reflected in the wealth of histories on that war compared with others, and the consistent use of the Vietnam War to periodise Australia's military history. The 1950s and early 1960s are often seen as the lead-up to the Australian deployment of troops to Vietnam, whereas 1975 is firmly perceived as the end of an era for the Australian military. Yet this focus belies the fact that for the 20 years prior to the deployment of Australian combat troops to Vietnam, Australia was actively engaged in conflicts with their own contexts, during which the Australian military grew and developed in response to the demands placed on it by a changing strategic environment. During this time, the Australian armed forces underwent significant expansion and, in the case of the army in particular, professionalisation. Much of the equipment, tactics and doctrine developed during the 20 years after the Second World War remained in place until the 1990s; it was also these first conflicts of the Cold War that shaped how Australia fought in Vietnam. Equally, contrary to a popular imagination that often foregrounds Curtin's 1942 'turn to America', Australian forces spent the two decades after the Second World War closely integrated with the British and the wider Commonwealth, marking them out from the 'norm' of working closely alongside the United States in Vietnam, which is so powerfully embedded into the public consciousness.

The period between the Second World War and the Vietnam War features only briefly in Australia's military history.¹ Within the popular imagining, as Australia's largest and most controversial post-Second World War conflict, Vietnam has attracted the lion's share of historical writing, overshadowing the years that preceded it. The Korean War is perhaps the best studied, with its own official history and a body of memoirs and studies.² This was a conventional conflict, with Australia participating in a handful of hard-fought battles, around which a narrative could be established. Later conflicts are less well served by histories, scholarly or otherwise.

1 Jeffrey Grey, *A military history of Australia*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 317.

2 Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, vol. 1, *Strategy and diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981). For the most recent discussion of the Korean War in the Australian context, see John Blaxland, Michael Kelly and Liam Higgins, *In from the cold: Reflections on Australia's Korean War* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), doi.org/10.22459/ifc.2019.

Beyond a small handful of memoirs and narrative histories, a notable feature of the writing on the conflicts in Malaya and Borneo and the preparations for war in Southeast Asia is the interconnected nature of the history. The structure of the official histories, which examine conflicts and crises in Southeast Asia rather than treating the conflicts as individual events, is the clearest example of the way that these conflicts should be understood as part of one overall effort by Australia to ensure its own security through collective defence in the region. Each commitment, therefore, is treated as one part of a broader strategic aim by the Official Historian, Peter Edwards.³ That some of the most useful military histories of this period are biographies, following key officers across multiple deployments and through the period's major changes within the military, is a further indicator of the way in which this early period can be viewed as a whole, and as important in and of itself. This is notable in the biographies of key military figures during this period, such as David Horner's biography of Chief of General Staff Lieutenant General John Wilton, and Jeffrey Grey's of Lieutenant General Thomas Daly, Wilton's successor.⁴

There are significant gaps in the historical understanding of this period, however, once one ventures beyond the official histories and the general histories of Australia's military past. The wars themselves, and the preparations for conflicts not fought, have attracted little in the way of Australian historical writing compared with, for instance, the campaigns of the First World War. Discounting contemporary accounts or memoirs, only Korea sees a handful of studies on the conflict.⁵ There are no Australian-focused histories of either Malaya or Confrontation. Similarly, the non-operational aspects of this period in Australia's military past are often ill-studied. This time period could be a rich vein for historians, with significant institutional changes within an Australian military adapting to

3 Edwards's two studies of the strategic and diplomatic contexts reflect the interrelated nature of the conflicts in Southeast Asia. However, the 10 volumes of the *Official history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts, 1948–1975* are dominated by Vietnam, while the Malayan Emergency and Borneo conflicts share one book.

4 DM Horner, *Strategic command: General Sir John Wilton and Australia's Asian wars* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Grey, *A soldier's soldier: A biography of Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly* (Cambridge; Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2012), doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107294240. Memoirs of other officers follow this trend. See for instance Brian W McFarlane, *We band of brothers: A true Australian adventure story* (Bowral: BW McFarlane, 2000); Pat Beale, *Operation orders: The experiences of an infantry officer* (Loftus: Australian Military History Publications, 2003).

5 For a literature review of the Korean War from the Australian perspective, see Blaxland, Kelly and Higgins, *In from the cold*, 6–12.

new technological conditions, social and racial change at home, profound strategic shifts and the need, for the first time, to maintain forces overseas for decades at a time.⁶ Yet there is nothing in Australian literature that examines the services during the crucial, fast-changing period of the 1950s and 1960s, in the style of, for instance, Brian McAllister Linn's *Elvis's army*, which explores the social, technological and institutional changes with the US Army.⁷

More broadly, the gaps in the literature that this book seeks to address reflect some of the broader problems in Australian military history. The body of literature is small and is focused on a handful of notable conflicts, rather than the broad sweep of *military* (rather than war) history. Australian historians, whether they define themselves as military historians or not, overwhelmingly focus on the First World War, and to a lesser extent the Second World War and Vietnam War. Discussions of well-known campaigns or battles dominate military historians' attentions, while social histories dominate the interests of Australian scholars examining Australia's military past.

Undoubtedly, this is the product of a small number of historians working on Australian military history topics; the number of Australian historians more broadly is similarly small compared with the United Kingdom or United States. Who is doing military history in Australia is also an issue that warrants ongoing discussion. The average Australian military historian is a man, of European descent and based in Canberra, either at The Australian National University, the Australian War Memorial or the University of New South Wales Canberra; this collection, as the editors acknowledge, is no exception. The absence of women and people from diverse backgrounds, including those who speak languages other than English and who approach military history from different cultural

6 There have been a handful of excellent studies on some of these topics in the last decade. See for instance Christina Twomey, 'Bring the family: Australian overseas military communities and regional engagement, 1945–1988', in *Beyond combat: Australian military activity away from the battlefield*, ed. Tristan Moss and Tom Richardson (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2018), 10–28; Mathew Radcliffe, 'In defence of White Australia: Discouraging "Asian marriage" in post war South-East Asia', *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 184–201, doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2014.911761; Noah Riseman, Shirleene Robinson and Graham Willett, *Serving in silence?* (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2018); Noah Riseman, 'Racism, Indigenous people and the Australian armed forces in the post-Second World War era', *History Australia* 10, no. 2 (2013): 159–79, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2013.11668466.

7 Brian McAllister Linn, *Elvis's army: Cold War GIs and the atomic battlefield*, illustrated ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), doi.org/10.4159/9780674973732.

perspectives, represents a significant gap in Australian military history. The data shows that, depending on level of appointment, there is rough parity between men and women in Australian history faculties across the country.⁸ Anecdotally, this is not the case in military history, particularly at more senior levels. Historians across the discipline should ask why, and how to change this. One feature of this discussion is the reticence of many to define themselves as military historians or to encourage others to do so, which is a symptom of the sometimes poor reputation that military history has in Australia as conservative and theory-averse; not all of this reputation is ill-deserved. Equally, there is a tendency to judge military history by its weakest examples, including popular histories not written by academics. While there are excellent military historians working on issues such as race, gender and military cultures, to name a few, one result of the narrowness of the field and those in it can be a skewing of historical work towards Australia's major and most publicly recognised conflicts, and away from other themes, military activities and historical periods.

This book seeks to address one such understudied period by bringing together Australia's Cold War military history prior to Vietnam in one coherent narrative. Crucially, it does not focus on the conflicts of Korea, Malaya and Borneo alone. To do so would be to ignore the broader context in which these occurred and the intense Australian focus on defending itself through collective security, comprehensive planning for possible wars, and the fight against threats at home. At the heart of this book is an examination of the way in which Australian strategy was translated into action 'on the ground', not just through combat, but through the commitment of armed forces throughout the region to deter conflict while preparing for it to break out. This is a classic strategic studies approach focused on the use of armed force in international affairs.

The book is divided into two main content parts and a concluding third part. The first examines the strategic shifts facing Australia in the immediate postwar period, and the way in which the military was structured to meet them. The first 20 years of Australia's Cold War were characterised by a series of strategic challenges, marked as much by their significant threat to Australia's security as their changing nature. In the first chapter, Stephan Frühling shows that there were few certainties for

8 See Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk, 'The numbers game: History staffing in Australian and New Zealand universities', *Australian Historical Studies* 50, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 365–69, doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1601750.

Australia during this period, as the nation dealt with decolonisation, the shift of Australian defence focus to Asia from the Middle East, the threats of nationalism and communism in the region and the need to manage collective security arrangements with allies and regional partners.

Frühling's insight at the strategic policy level is buttressed by John Blaxland's assessment of the effects of Australia's largest ever conflict, the Second World War, on Australia's military forces in the early Cold War period. This chapter is critical in setting up the legacies of this conflict, its impact on a radically reduced military force in Australia and the interaction between the United States and the United Kingdom, which dominate Australia's strategic relations in Asia during this period. The next chapter focuses on an aspect rarely integrated into military history: internal security. The Cold War was not seen by Australia as merely a military conflict; it was also a war of ideas, of culture, of economic structures and methods of government. The Cold War was also fought at home, albeit far less violently than in the jungles of Southeast Asia. David Horner examines the role played by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, newly created after the Second World War, in defending Australia from foreign and domestic threats.

Often termed the 'Forgotten War', Australia's participation in the Korean War sat directly between two different periods of the early Cold War. Largely fought with Second World War equipment and tactics, the war more resembled those conflicts that went before it than those that came after. However, in the clear linking of Australia's strategic interests with the judicious deployment of a small number of troops in support of allies, the Korean War had the hallmarks of later Cold War conflicts. Militarily, as Thomas Richardson shows in Chapter 4, Australia was keenly aware of the way in which the commitment of forces to the Korean peninsula might help secure not only that country from communism, but also ensure a security arrangement with the United States. Yet, in order to do this, the Australian Government recognised that its soldiers, sailors and airmen had to make a meaningful contribution to the war; for the Australian forces deployed, therefore, the war was an intense one.

The second part of the book focuses on the shift of Australia's armed forces from fighting and preparing for conventional war to counterinsurgency warfighting after 1955. During this period, Australian forces were integrated with British Commonwealth organisations under the FESR, based in Malaya and Singapore, which is explored by Tristan Moss in

Chapter 5. The deployment of a battalion of Australian infantry in 1955 reflected Australia's commitment to collective defence with the British Commonwealth in the face of the threat of another global war. As part of 28 Commonwealth Brigade, in the British Far East Air Forces and as a significant part of the British-led naval presence in the region, Australian forces made a substantial contribution to the Commonwealth's first response should war have broken out, while Australia was also closely involved in planning and training for these possible wars.

While ostensibly based in Malaysia as part of the FESR, Australian forces, particularly those from the army, spent a great deal of their time fighting insurgents during the Malayan Emergency. Richardson details this frustrating war, in which Australian ground forces rarely saw the enemy. The formation of Malaysia in 1957 led to Australia's third Cold War conflict, against Indonesian Confrontation. Lachlan Grant and Michael Kelly's chapter on operations in Borneo details how, even before the deployment to Vietnam, Australian forces had gained significant experience in jungle warfare, working alongside British forces to defeat the policy of Indonesian Confrontation.

At the same time, Australia's Papua New Guinea-based force – the Pacific Islands Regiment – prepared to defend the Australian territory of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Rather than an overlooked outpost of the Australian Army, PNG was an important part of Australia's defence. Given the tensions with Indonesia elsewhere – which erupted into a low-level conflict in Borneo – Australian planners worried that the war would reach Australian territory. In Chapter 8, Moss explores how the Australian Army's series of deep patrols on the border complemented broader Commonwealth plans to defeat Indonesia in the case of conventional war.

The period 1945–66 was one of change, in which Australia reorientated its defence forces and strategic outlook to address a threat arising in its region in the context of the Cold War. It was this period that laid the foundations for the military that would go to war in Vietnam. Peter Dean's final chapter, and the concluding part of the book, draws together the strategic, doctrinal and tactical influences on the Australian armed forces preparation and conduct of its roles in Southeast Asia, asking how the strategy evolved, the military adapted and to what extent these changes were reflective of an 'Australian way of war'.

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