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**Thinking Across Time**  
**Concurrent Historical Analysis**  
**on Military Operations**

by

**Alan Ryan**

**July 2001**

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## About the Author

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Dr Ryan has written and presented papers on political and military history as well as on the crisis facing the discipline of history in schools and the professions. His most recent work, published by the LWSC, is titled *'Primary Risks and Primary Responsibilities': Australian Defence Force Participation in International Force East Timor*.

## Land Warfare Studies Centre

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## **ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AHU	Army History Unit
CALL	Centre for Army Lessons Learned (US)
CATDC	Combined Arms Training and Development Centre
DAA	Defeating Attacks against Australia
DJFHQ	Deployable Joint Force Headquarters
INTERFET	International Force East Timor
LOAT	Land Operations Analysis Team
LWSC	Land Warfare Studies Centre
UNITAF	Unified Task Force (Somalia)
UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor
US	United States

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Developing an argument for the incorporation of historical analysis into the way that the Australian Defence Force conducts operations was never going to be a task that an individual could do alone. This proposal is the product of wide-ranging consultations with officers and men of the Defence Force as well as with my professional colleagues. Many of those that I pumped for information on our historical memory of operations were not aware that I was trying to work out a methodology as well as simply gather evidence. In fact I was initially not aware that this paper would be a by-product of my research. As time has passed in the preparation of the paper and as the argument is coloured by my own experiences, it would be unfair to enlist you all in justifying my proposals. Accordingly, I wish to make a blanket acknowledgment to those who assisted me in my research and who might recognise something of their own opinions in the paper. Any departure from your point of view is my own responsibility and I look forward to a number of robust debates arising out of this publication.

I would, however, like to express particular appreciation to those who helped with specific advice and source material knowing that a paper would eventuate. I include Major General Michael O'Brien, CSC; Mr Bill Stacy, Historian, United States Army Forces Command; and Lieutenant Colonel Bill Houston of the Army History Unit. At the Land Warfare Studies Centre I have received the considered opinions of Colonel David Horner, Lieutenant Colonel Neil James, Lieutenant Colonel Ian Wing and Dr Michael Evans. I am also particularly grateful for the advice given me by Warrant Officer Ian Kuring of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps Museum. Mr Ara Nalbandian and Mrs Linda Malaquin provided invaluable editorial and administrative support.

Of course, only I remain liable for the opinions expressed in this paper.

## ABSTRACT

This working paper argues that the skills of historical analysis are an essential element of military decision-making. It suggests that military decision-making is shaped by temporal circumstances and that consequently historical awareness must be seen as one of the key attributes of an effective officer. Historical knowledge and methodology have a key role to play in military operations. Not only should the Australian Defence Force (ADF) adopt a more sophisticated approach to the education of its officers in the theory and practice of history, but it needs to employ trained military historians in operational roles.

Historians have the vital function of recording military operations for posterity, but they can also have a more immediate role as operational analysts, capable of providing immediate feedback to commanders, developers of armed forces and governments. As the United States (US) Army has found, the deployment of properly trained and well-prepared historians on military operations adds value to the commander's information resources. There are many tasks that historians can perform for the military, in peacetime as well as on operations. Once the ADF starts to experience the benefits that historians can deliver, it might even emulate the US practice of using the command historian in an advisory role. By receiving concurrent and integrated analysis, commanders can adjust behaviour and correct tactical errors. The existence of a staff section of military historians on a force headquarters can help to cut through the 'fog' that increasingly bedevils commanders in the information age. Additionally, as the modern military is expected to undertake a wide range of non-traditional tasks such as peace and humanitarian relief operations, commanders need a broader perspective than the traditional staff structures established for warfighting can provide.

It is unlikely that the ADF will move quickly to make the revolutionary cultural adjustments necessary to progress beyond the technocratic model of staff work that was developed for industrial-age warfare. Nonetheless, it does need to begin to grow officers, both specialists and generalists, who are comfortable with their responsibilities as actors on an historical stage and who can apply skills in temporal analysis to further Australia's national interests. This paper suggests just some of the ways in which the historian's craft can 'add value' to the way the ADF conducts operations.





# THINKING ACROSS TIME

## CONCURRENT HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ON MILITARY OPERATIONS

*If systematic study of the past is taken away, only personal experience, hearsay and intuition remain. Military history may be an inadequate tool for commanders to rely on, but a better one has yet to be designed.*

Martin Van Creveld<sup>1</sup>

*[The] critical ability to 'think across time' is the essence of a contemporary approach to history which Western Armies need to cultivate.*

Dr Michael Evans<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

The use of armed force by the state is the ultimate political act. When an Australian government dispatches its military forces on operations, it almost inevitably does so because civil measures and remedies are inadequate. The use of military forces represents an acknowledgment that only a drastic intervention can modify the course of events. Although not perhaps as subtle as the other tools of change available to government—such as diplomacy, or trade policy—the decision to employ military force is an emphatic statement of political will. When Australia sends its troops on operations—whether to war or simply to provide aid and security—we are witnessing a deliberate attempt to change the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1985, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Evans, 'Military history in the education of Western army officers', in Hugh Smith (ed.), *Preparing Future Leaders: Officer Education and Training For the Twenty-First Century*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1997, p. 135.

course of history. No other aspect of governmental activity requires such close scrutiny and analysis as when we hazard the lives of our service people to serve the national interest.

This paper has its origins in research that I conducted into the formation of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) while the force was in being. During that period it became obvious that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as a whole placed little premium on preserving its own history and adopted a slipshod, ad hoc approach to gathering the data and historical knowledge that form the collective memory of any organisation. In the aftermath of that operation, it has proved very difficult for researchers to obtain authoritative information concerning the dates on which events occurred, the precise nature of what actually transpired and the reasons for which decisions were taken. In turn, this failure to maintain accurate and accessible records has resulted in rumours being accepted as fact. Even worse, aspects of the official record as well as other contemporary reports have been demonstrated to be incorrect. The carelessness with which many official accounts were amassed has dogged a number of writers who are working on aspects of the operation. The potential consequences are serious. In my own case, the implications of poor record-keeping appeared as I prepared some briefing materials for the Defence subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Both Air Commodore Roxley McLennan, Air Component Commander and Australian Contingent Commander, and Brigadier Mark Kelly, who had been Chief of Staff in Headquarters INTERFET, pointed out a number of significant errors in the post-operational report, the INTERFET website and other contemporary reports that formed the basis of my writing. Only by being able to consult with these central actors was I prevented from misleading a parliamentary committee. Those working in the future might not be so fortunate.

Historians expect to encounter mistakes in the historical record, but it is of concern that the ADF cannot create a reliable contemporary record of its activities for its own purposes. This failing is a particular problem since military forces are called to give account for their actions to a national and international audience. A number of inquiries have recently taken place into the future of the Army and the performance of some units both in East Timor and previous to the deployment. Without an accurate institutional record, the Army opens itself up to innuendo and attacks that may detract from its very tangible achievements. What is more, the consciousness that an accurate record is being kept provides decision makers with a longer-term perspective and enhances accountability.

Some months after the handover to the United Nations Transitional Administration East Timor (UNTAET) I spoke to a group of senior and middle-ranking officers about the problems encountered in researching contemporary events. Though providing support in principle for my suggestion that the ADF needed to be ready to deploy military-history detachments with forces on operations, one officer raised a practical reservation—a concern that was clearly shared by most of those present. Did I really think that during times of crisis—when so many other skilled personnel were required in-theatre—the deployment of military historians would be considered a priority? To be honest, I had to answer that it would not. The ADF is a practical organisation, consisting of practical people. To most officers historical thinking is too nebulous a concept to be appreciated as conferring an operational advantage. Yet, as I investigated further, it became clear that the ADF was in danger of fighting with one hand tied behind its back. Australia expects its military operations to be concluded successfully, and when they are, most members of the defence organisation—both civilian and military—are content not to question the process.

Perhaps the most pithy, and certainly the most trenchant, observation made on this tendency was by an officer who commented that the INTERFET deployment had ‘rolled from initial bravado to “Shit, what do we do? How do we do it? Shit, shit, shit!” into “We won the war. Aren’t we great!”, and now into “We won the war. Everything we did was well planned and our plans worked”’. Every organisation, and the military in particular, needs to be on guard against the comforting revisionism that accompanies operational success. If the ADF were to adopt a coherent and methodologically sound approach to scrutinising the manner in which it conducts operations, it might become more critically self-aware and be better informed about the business of wielding force in the cause of national policy.

### **Why History and Why ‘Instant’ History?**

Military professionals generally possess a poor understanding of both the ‘practical’ utility of military history and, by extension, the contribution that historians can make to the conduct of the profession of arms. Most military officers will pay ready lip-service to the notion that military history is important. In their training, officers are more than likely to have read widely in military history and written a number of essays, contemplating some aspect of the ‘lessons’ that military history can teach us. Few officers, however, would have studied history in depth; they would not have read beyond individual accounts of past events to develop a synoptic understanding of the complex interrelationships of history. Achieving this sort of general overview of history is important. Understanding why Wellington’s line stopped Napoleon’s columns dead at Waterloo is a type of historical knowledge. Having a deeper appreciation of the technological, social, political and economic tumult of the succeeding two hundred years is far more valuable.

At a time when the actions of even relatively junior officers can be captured by the media and transmitted around the world with far-reaching strategic consequences, the ADF needs to produce an officer corps imbued with an awareness that each commander is an actor on a global and historical stage. While the phenomenon of the ‘strategic corporal’ is a concept cited more for rhetorical effect than a matter of day-to-day reality, even relatively junior officers often have to speak and act independently, but on behalf of their governments. Accordingly, when we send forces on operations, commanders require access to a broader historical perspective than can be justly expected that their individual professional education will provide. Perhaps most importantly, the ADF needs to develop the ability to ‘capture’ its own history as it occurs so that the appropriate lessons can be learnt and to ensure that the ADF’s institutional memory is not lost, or distorted.

This paper makes the case for re-establishing historical awareness as a fundamental plank of the way that the ADF conducts operations. It focuses on some approaches that the Army might adopt to implement ‘historical mindedness’ on operations, but the argument is equally applicable to the other two services. As any major ADF operation is invariably joint, there is little value in considering aspects of service history in isolation. What is more, operational decisions and actions are not purely military in nature and have significance beyond the forces involved. They have political implications for the country that deploys troops and inevitably colour the way in which the society sees itself. If, for instance, the historical record had shown ANZAC troops at the Gallipoli landing recoiling from the withering Turkish fire and fleeing back to their landing craft, a key part of the national self-image would be lacking. The fact that the most influential early account of the landing was written by a journalist who did not witness the action and who attempted to put a positive spin on what was a traumatic and confused bloodbath, is neither here nor

there.<sup>3</sup> While in the past inaccuracy, mythology, bias and propaganda characterised the writing of most military history, the maintenance of an accurate and objective record will be one of the most potent weapons underpinning the legitimate use of armed force in the future.

Admittedly, ‘instant’ history has its disadvantages? most obviously the problem of maintaining an objective perspective while working in the midst of the action, without access to all pertinent records and often on a tight schedule. The corresponding advantages, however, more than make up for these limitations. Dr Walter Hermes, former Chief of the Staff Support Branch of the Army’s Center of Military History, wrote that:

The historian can be on the scene while the records are relatively intact. He can screen the source documents and organize a historical file that should eventually contain the core material for his study. By being close to the action officers while history is in the making, the historian can absorb a sense of the drama of a situation and a feeling for the atmosphere. He can also talk to many of the participants while everything is still fresh in their minds, before the fog of time begins to obscure the sequence of events and leads them to magnify their own roles . . . in many cases the instant history may be the only reliable account available for some years. It serves as a useful reference tool until the passage of time and the accessibility of other records permit a more accurate and balanced account to be written.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, then, the purpose of this paper is to use contemporary experience of military-history operations to:

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<sup>3</sup> Ellis Ashmead Bartlett, see L. L. Robson, *Australia and the Great War 1914–1918*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 46–7.

<sup>4</sup> Walter G. Hermes, ‘The Use of Military History in Staff Work’, in John E. Jessup, Jr, and Robert W. Coakley (eds), *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington D.C., 1979, pp. 378–9.

- demonstrate that ‘historical mindedness’ is a key characteristic that needs to be imbued in officers to hone their level of situational awareness on operations;
- consider the various uses to which historical knowledge and methodology can be put on military operations; and
- argue for the creation of military-history detachments that will deploy with Australian forces, provide historical advice to the commander and gather an accurate, objective collection of data for both concurrent and retrospective analysis.

This paper argues that the historian’s craft can be applied to more than just the education of officers. It should form the basis of the manner in which Australian forces conduct military operations. The ADF can learn from the creative ways in which historians are employed elsewhere—particularly by the United States (US) military. It is not enough just to instill the importance of history into officers. Developing an appreciation of how history can be used to ‘value-add’ to operational decision-making also requires that decision makers possess historical literacy and have access to specialist advisers. The use of historical methodology on operations can deliver a graduated range of ‘products’ that can improve the way that deployed forces perform. The products of historical work range from simply verifying the accuracy of operational records to providing historical advice to commanders faced with critical decisions. In between these two extremes, historians can assist by deploying with a force to produce ‘lessons learnt’ studies for immediate distribution, they can contribute to doctrine formulation and they can develop profiles to help commanders appreciate what challenges have faced their predecessors in the past.

The ADF does not use historical analytical thinking nearly well enough in its day-to-day operations—and it hardly uses it at all on operational missions. The time has come to slip the restraints of

the limited technocratic mind-set that has often shaped military decision-making in the past and learn from the more flexible approaches applied by post-industrial-age forces. Although it is unlikely that the ADF will be able to incorporate temporal analysis into its operational doctrine without some experimentation, we need to be aware of the potential uses of history in the military. Accordingly, before considering the practical steps that need to be taken to apply the historian's craft to operations, it is necessary to commence by considering the intellectual significance of historical thinking for the ADF.

### **Fostering 'historical mindedness'**

Almost ten years ago, Professor David Horner, the prominent Australian military historian and an Army officer himself, wrote that:

The Australian Defence Force has never had a clear and consistent policy on military history. The attitude has been one of ambiguity. On the one hand, over a period of years there has been a general acceptance that military history is of value to the services. On the other hand, there has been a widespread attitude that the study and writing of military history is an indulgence. Military history may be useful for teaching lessons and maintaining *esprit de corps*, but to study it in any concentrated and academic fashion would divert officers from their prime task, namely training for war.<sup>5</sup>

Little has changed in the past decade. Mirroring the trend to vocational utility in education that has devastated student participation in coherent, disciplinary-based history programs in schools and universities, defence decision-makers continue to see

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<sup>5</sup> David Horner, 'Historians in the Australian Defence Force', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 19, November 1991, p. 31; see also David Horner, 'Writing History in the Australian Army', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1993, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 72–9.



historical ‘product’ as a source of anodyne, predigested and palatable ‘lessons’ that will help justify predetermined courses of conduct.<sup>6</sup> Brevity and the trenchant observation are far more highly prized in the ADF than the frank and honest admission that a particular set of circumstances may not lend themselves to easy simplification. Among certain thrusting, ambitious officers it sometimes appears that the positive assertion of a point of view better suits the warrior image than the thoughtful consideration of alternative explanations for events. In fact, the tendency to insist on certainty from historical narratives is detrimental to the effectiveness of officers who will work in conditions of uncertainty throughout their careers.

No serious historian will claim that knowledge of history will provide decision makers with objective certainty about their actions. In fact, the more one reads history, the more complex and varied are the explanations that proffer themselves for events. To return to the analogy of Waterloo, Wellington’s victory over Napoleon was not just a simple victory of line over column. The facts that Napoleon’s forces were fully committed, outnumbered, logistically overdrawn and outflanked are also important. The state of Napoleon’s health and physical exhaustion is a factor, as are the unquantifiable human factors. If the British Foot Guards had not held Hougoumont Farm in a hand-to-hand battle with their French counterparts, Napoleon might have easily rolled up

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the focus on vocational utility at the expense of liberal education, the declining participation rates in history and the fragmentation of the historical profession, see Stuart Macintyre, ‘Discipline Review: History’, *AHA Bulletin*, no. 83, December 1996, p. 4; Donald Horne, ‘Learning Curbs’, *The Weekend Australian*, 19–20 April 1997, p. 28; Robert Manne, *The Way We Live Now: The Controversies of the Nineties*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p. 259; Diana Thorp, ‘History Lessons’, *The Australian*, 19 April 1999, p. 16; Stuart Macintyre, ‘The decline, fall and rise of history’, *The Australian*, 10 May 2000, p. 50; ‘Caning the classics’, *Lateline*, ABC Television, 13 August 1997.

Wellington's line. Then of course there is the explanation that this was a battle between large forces and subject to multiple levels of interpretation; it was not just a duel between two commanders.

This simple example demonstrates that the more we know of historical events, the more sophisticated our understanding becomes. Consequently, the craft of the historical thinker is not simply about providing plausible explanations for what happened in the past. People who possess a historical mind-set apply their learning to overcome individual prejudice and develop understandings that enable them to operate within the complex variables of past, present and future. History is not the exclusive province of the academic historian—in fact only a small proportion of those who ever study history, even at an advanced level, end up working as historians. In every walk of professional life—most obviously in the law but also in the sciences, engineering and administration—people apply historical skills and knowledge on a daily basis. A sophisticated approach to history is required of officers whose work involves the application of policy in physical and human environments. What the ADF requires are officers whose intellectual understanding of history goes beyond the bald recounting of facts and simplistic abstraction of historical lessons. Such officers are better equipped to apply the technical aspects of the profession of arms than those who see their task as limited to creating certain effects in the present. If the ADF is to be an effective tool of national policy, its leaders need to be capable of more than the simple application of violence; they need to fully appreciate their place in the political–strategic–operational continuum.

In a series of papers and presentations written and presented during 1997, Michael Evans, then a historian in the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis and now a senior colleague of mine at the Land Warfare Studies Centre, made a cogent case for much greater emphasis on military history in the education of Western

army officers.<sup>7</sup> His contention was that the Australian Army in particular:

has a weak institutional and intellectual tradition in using history as a professional discipline and has fallen behind other English-speaking Western armies in its understanding of the subject . . . the Army's present approach to analysing war is too mechanistic, materialist and narrowly functional in approach.<sup>8</sup>

He concluded that the training of Australian Army officers was producing too many 'technocrats' and too few leaders capable of using historical knowledge and method 'as an analytical tool to evaluate current problems through establishing context and perspective'.<sup>9</sup> I am forced to agree. The education of officers continues to reflect the utilitarian style endemic in the Australian tertiary education system that focuses on teaching professionals to seek out only that which is tangible and fundamental. Like lawyers who are only interested in the *ratio decidendi*—the 'reason for the decision'? and ignore all extraneous detail, military officers often simply plunder historical narrative for the 'key' facts. The problem with this approach is that historical knowledge is holistic. As suggested by the example of the Battle of Waterloo, developing an understanding of what 'really' happened is only possible within the context of a whole range of environmental factors.

The point made by Evans is critical. Because all officers have been exposed to history at some time and have even 'done' some in the form of an essay or a presentation, there is a danger that many expect that they understand what history is all about. Most officers

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<sup>7</sup> Evans, 'Military history in the education of Western army officers', *passim.*; Michael Evans, *Western Armies and the Use of Military History since 1945*, Working Paper No. 46, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Evans, *Western Armies and the Use of Military History since 1945*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

are only exposed to a limited part of the totality of the discipline of history and are the poorer for it. The tendency to think of history as a generic, non-professional skill is not restricted to the ADF.

A session at a recent national conference of the Australian Historical Association was informed that of course ‘everyone is an historian’. An assertion made by a member of the public to a meeting of surgeons that ‘we are all brain surgeons’ would only engender mass hysteria. The historian’s trade is not defined by a passing acquaintance with the past—it is based on the rigorous application of proven methodologies and the detailed scrutiny of all the available evidence. The more we read, research and write history, the more we are likely to be humbled by what we do not know.

What then can historical-mindedness do for professional officers who are fully engaged with the practical aspects of their trade? All historians working in the area of defence regularly witness the frustration of officers who feel that historical knowledge should help them in their work, but end up bumping their head against the sheer complexity of the discipline and the oft-stated caution that the issues are rarely black and white. The problem is that they are asking the wrong question. Historical knowledge does not provide easily packaged answers for contemporary problems, but furnishes the officer with the tools to assess problems. As Evans pointed out:

The fine distinction between reaching informed judgments through the scrupulous study of historical evidence and perceiving and inculcating lessons from a superficial understanding of the past has frequently been misunderstood in military establishments—especially those in which historians have sometimes lacked broad historical education and understanding of historical method.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

We all have a tendency to simplify issues and facts to accord with our own understanding and to help resolve complex issues. Nowhere is this tendency more evident than on military operations? and necessarily so. On the one hand, commanders need to be capable of making decisions; they cannot be paralysed by their doubts and the confusion of the moment. On the other, all officers need to be fully informed of the temporal, social and political environment in which they work. A headquarters staff must be capable of accommodating itself to the situation in which it finds itself? whether that is warfighting, conducting peace operations or delivering humanitarian assistance. Forces must be capable of working in coalition with disparate partners whose own traditions differ widely. Increasingly, troop commanders need to be better informed about all aspects of the battlespace in which they operate. There may be no clear-cut enemy, civilian populations may be hostile, and the observance of cultural sensitivities may acquire strategic significance. If officers are to be effective agents of state policy in this uncertain environment, then they should possess an advanced level of historical and cultural awareness. As the distinguished British military historian Professor Sir Michael Howard argued, students of history should not just indulge in a scholarly exercise to sharpen their wits; they must be able to ‘step outside their own cultural skins and enter the minds of others’.<sup>11</sup>

The problem that confronts partisans of history is convincing sceptics that history has relevance. A brief perusal of the range of contemporary scholarly journals would do little to support the historian’s case. The historical profession as a whole has to accept the blame for the poor reputation that the discipline currently possesses. Unfortunately, academic history has fallen prey to the post-modern contagion that has infected so many other

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 18.

disciplines. Many professional historians—who produce the great body of written history—have accepted the philosophy that there is no hierarchy of significance, and that interpretation of the past is purely discretionary and open to whatever ideological position the historian wishes to adopt. Academic writing is increasingly obscure and unintelligible to laypersons. The teaching of history in universities is rarely synoptic, but focuses on the research interests of (tenured) staff or panders to short-term notions of vocational relevance, invariably resulting in facile and decontextualised subjects.

The products of historical research are, if anything, worse than what transpires in the classrooms. In his critical investigation of the gap that exists between academic historians and policy makers, Professor John Lewis Gaddis identified what he called the ‘monographic’ fallacy. This fallacy was based on the single-minded obsession that many historians have with their particular topics—to the exclusion of all else.<sup>12</sup> He cited the complaint of the prominent American historian David Hackett Fischer that historians pile monograph on monograph in the vain hope that some day someone will be able to make sense of it all.<sup>13</sup> Examples abound of the failure of historians to make the necessary connections between their work and their readers’ need to be informed. In Australia the tendency to focus on the local has resulted in a vast body of scholarship about the depredations inflicted on indigenous Australians since first settlement that pays little attention to the wider historical phenomenon of imperialism. Similarly, we have gendered history that abandons all sense of proportion to pursue feminist political objectives. Many historical journals cater to a limited readership and appear to be written

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<sup>12</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, ‘Expanding the Data Base: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Enrichment of Security Studies’, *International Security*, Summer 1987, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, p. 5.

more to confirm their author's ideological viewpoints than educate a general audience.

Not surprisingly students who wish to value-add to their professional studies? and this includes young officers—often fail to see what it is that history can offer them. Considering this issue, Gordon Connell-Smith and Howell A. Lloyd offered a straightforward explanation of the practical utility of history. They argued that history possessed a ‘unique capacity to promote in those who study it qualities of judgement in relation to complex and changing problems in human society . . . the study of history, properly pursued, has particular relevance in an age of unprecedented change.’<sup>14</sup> Curricula developed with more forethought and greater responsibility than is generally demonstrated in our contemporary universities can still achieve this outcome. While in recent years historians have generally failed history, there is no reason why this failure should continue.

Putting aside the unfortunate experiences that many Australian policy-makers have had of history, there is much to be learnt from the way that history and historians are utilised by governments and bureaucracies elsewhere. In the foreword to *Military History and the Military Profession*—a major work that focused on the way in which the US military utilises historians—Anne N. Forman, former General Counsel of the US Air Force, suggested that historical analysis needed to be built into the staffing process:

If active, thoughtful professional scholars are employed on the staffs of senior policy-makers, if the staffs are practiced in using their services, and if the historians have adequate records and other materials on which to base the information and perspective, decisions can be improved and policy will be better informed. The very presence of an active historical program not only provides the leadership with a powerful tool for analysis, it also

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon Connell-Smith and Howell A. Lloyd, *The Relevance of History*, Heinemann, London, 1972, p. 3.

raises the consciousness of the entire organization, making it more likely to use history and integrate a sound understanding of the past into policy and decision making. In effect, the presence of energetic historians affects the culture of the organization and stimulates usage. Insofar as using history improves the organization, its further use is stimulated, setting in motion a reciprocal cycle of excellence that should provide enormous satisfaction to professional historians and, at the same time, save lives and professional resources.<sup>15</sup>

In 'Information Age' warfare the critical ability to 'think across time' is an essential element of operational success. Contemporary operations have their genesis in the events of the past, and historical thinkers are best equipped to interpret and explain the threads of events with accuracy. At least part of 'the fog of war' that dogs military operations is the miasma of myth and disinformation that is ever-present when resort is made to armed force. Nowhere is this truer than on peace operations where each party has a vested interest in having its own version of the truth prevail. Similarly, military success is not judged only by operational factors. Future judgments of current actions will determine whether posterity assesses the outcome as 'victory' or even simply justifiable. Field Marshal Sir William Slim wrote that a commander:

has to make a vital decision on incomplete information in a matter of seconds, and afterwards the experts can sit down at leisure, with all the facts before them, and argue about what he might, could, or should have done. Lucky the soldier, if . . . the tactical experts decide after 20 years of profound consideration that what he did in three minutes was right.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Anne N. Forman, 'Foreword' in David A. Charters, Marc Milner and J. Brent Wilson (eds), *Military History and the Military Profession*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 1992, p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in General Barry R. McCaffrey, 'Return Fire: We Ignore the Lessons of the Last 30 Years at our Peril', *Armed Forces Journal International*, August 2000, p. 16.



A commander with a historian on his staff has someone who can provide historical perspective at the time decisions are made. Perhaps just as significantly, he has a trained observer and advocate who will be able to record what actually occurred in the light of the circumstances as they appeared at the time—not as they seem to the armchair strategists reconstructing events years after the fact.<sup>17</sup>

### **The utility of military history**

In a justly famous essay entitled *The Use and Abuse of Military History*, Michael Howard pointed out that there is ‘a certain fear in academic circles, where military history is liable to be regarded as a handmaid of militarism, that its chief use may be propagandist and “myth-making”’.<sup>18</sup> In another well-known essay *The Lessons of History*, he argued that the professional historian will recognise the limitations of the craft and will be sceptical of those who claim to abstract ‘lessons’ from past experience.<sup>19</sup> But if history is not about finding and establishing binding precedents for future success, it is about educating the judgment. Dr John Reeve of the Australian Defence Force Academy recently pointed out that ‘History provides the only real evidence against which we can test strategic concepts. History has advantages in strategic discussion: it is real, it is unclassified, and we know who won.’<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the application of history and historical method to the harsh reality

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<sup>17</sup> A contemporary example of the gap between the operational commander and those made wise by retrospective knowledge is found in the retort made by General Barry McCaffrey to the charge that he used excessive force prosecuting the Battle of Rumaylah in the days after the ceasefire that concluded Operation Desert Storm in 1991. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–16.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, in *The Causes of Wars*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1983, pp. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 10–11.

<sup>20</sup> Dr John Reeve, ‘How not to Defend the Inner Arc: The Lessons of Japanese Defeat’, *The Navy*, vol. 62, no. 3, July–September 2000, p. 3.

of military operations is critical in assisting military professionals to do their job and in helping civilians to understand what it is that the military does on their behalf.

Considerable confusion still surrounds the role played by historians in military life. A great deal of what is written for popular consumption is either antiquarian in nature? the history of belts, buckles and bayonets? or is what Richard Holmes, the prominent British historian and territorial brigadier, terms ‘military pornography’.<sup>21</sup> Much of the latter category relies on salacious accounts of combat, the characteristics of weapons and the effects of firepower. In addition, there is much valuable work done by professional historians reflecting on the impact of war on society. This type of social history is what is usually taught in universities, and it has sponsored a large body of literature targeted at a general audience. While of broad social significance, it is a small part of what professional soldiers need to know in order to be fully informed practitioners of their craft.

Within military circles there are different species of military history. History is used to instruct soldiers, it is used to justify military performance to the public, it is called upon to provide ‘evidence’ in support of particular doctrinal approaches and it is used to provide ‘models’ of combat behaviour. Each of these functions is considered in this paper. There are, however, limitations on each approach, and it is my contention that the ADF has failed to utilise trained historians to gain the greatest effect. The remainder of this paper sets out how the skills of the historian should be employed to assist in the critical analysis of operations as they occur and to provide rapid feedback to commanders and their staffs.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Holmes, *Firing Line*, Pimlico, London, 1985, p. 61.

With respect to the instructional function of military history, the well-known British historian John Keegan pointed out that historical accounts are used as a part of the education of officers to inure them to the brutal facts of combat. In an instructional context, exposure to historical battle narratives can ‘reduce the events of combat to as few and as easily recognisable a set of elements as possible’.<sup>22</sup> There are also different varieties of official history. Traditionally, official history has been the history of generals, not of soldiers, and such histories have often represented warfare in the abstract—as the movement of formations with little account for the gritty and violent realities of combat. Writing about the British official histories of World War I, Keegan judged that they were ‘so little informed by the humane spirit of general historiography that they might have been written by what the publicists for science fiction movies like to call “alien life forms”’.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, we have what Keegan has famously called the ‘battle piece’—the account of combat couched in heroic rhetoric but which completely fails to tell the reader what actually happened.

Interestingly, it was an Australian, Charles Bean, who pioneered a different approach to official history. Australia’s official historian of World War I, Bean served with the AIF throughout the War and had the advantage of witnessing most of the major engagements in which Australians were involved. He interviewed participants, walked the ground and collected a massive treasure-trove of primary-source material that went beyond the official sources that informed the British history. Although this approach would be considered unremarkable now, it was revolutionary for its time. Bean attempted to build a holistic picture of what had actually occurred. While Bean has since been accused of national

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<sup>22</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> John Keegan, ‘The Historian and Battle’, *International Security*, no. 3, Winter 1978–79, p. 144.

myth-making, his writing is an honest account of how he perceived the conduct of operations, and it was a vision shared by many of his contemporaries. The fact that he was there, had access to the participants and the contemporary record, and was able to apply a disciplined methodology to the gathering of information distinguished his writing from the bland record created by the British official historians in the aftermath of war.<sup>24</sup>

Trained as a journalist, Bean recognised that the historian had a responsibility to do more than compile the objective record of events. Although it took him almost a quarter century to complete the official history, Bean was no antiquarian—he did not mull over events the significance of which had long since ceased to resonate. The Great War was the defining event of his generation, and Bean had been intimately involved in it. This involvement did not detract from his contribution as a commentator. The historian must have the courage to make judgments about his or her subject matter. It is worth contrasting his approach with that adopted by the director of the British official history, Brigadier General Sir James Edmonds. Sir James intended that his work ‘provide with reasonable compass an authoritative account, suitable for general readers and for students at military schools’.<sup>25</sup> Critical judgments were left to posterity.

By comparison, Bean’s approach was critical, yet it demonstrated the fundamental conundrum of the operational historian. Bean accepted that, while gaining access to classified information, there are some issues about which the historian must remain silent for reasons of national interest. In 1948, reflecting on the process of writing his history he pointed out that:

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<sup>24</sup> See Donald E. Graves, “‘Naked Truths for the Asking’: Twentieth-century Military Historians and the Battlefield Narrative’, in Charters, Milner and Wilson (eds), *Military History and the Military Profession*, pp. 46–7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

A war historian's job is to establish and explain history in so far as he can. He must explain why certain events occurred as they did, why decisions were made. If mistakes were made he must criticise them. He must analyse any shortcomings, so that they can be remedied in the future. He must present the facts so that credit is given for effort and sacrifice. Above all, the historian must be a person whom the General Staff trusted completely during the war, so that they could let him know everything that was going on, yet be quite certain he would not divulge anything that would damage his country.<sup>26</sup>

The duty 'to do no harm' must be balanced against the potential misuse of military history by the military profession. At staff colleges officers are taught to invoke military history to substantiate doctrinal approaches and to validate tactical solutions. Very often, the examples selected do not suit the purpose and are sometimes simply incorrect. However, the expectation that the 'lessons' of history can determine present courses of conduct dies hard. The simplistic expectation of the utility of military history is that historical narratives can be enlisted to 'prove a point'. This use of history is, however, based on a perception of the historical narrative as a 'story' rather than an analytical process that attempts to draw in all of the relevant factors to explain why an event occurred. By considering history as analysis rather than a mere literary account, we begin to understand how historians can contribute to the conduct of contemporary operations.

Although some scholars would argue that the study of history is purely disinterested and should be pursued for its own sake rather than some practical end, there is no denying that military history has real utility at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. As Michael Howard concluded:

the study of military history should not only enable the civilian to understand the nature of war and its part in shaping society, but

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<sup>26</sup> Zelig McLeod, 'Long: He writes our second War History', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 1948, pp. 10–11.

also directly improve the officer's competence in his profession. But it should never be forgotten that the true use of history, military or civil is, as Jacob Burkhardt once said, not to make men clever for next time; it is to make them wise for ever.<sup>27</sup>

Historical analysis is not a task to be undertaken lightly. Amateur historians often regard the past as a 'grab-bag' of examples to be called on to support their prejudices. For their part many, probably most, professional historians have lost sight of the importance of, and methodology attached to, concurrent historical analysis on Australian military operations. In part, the gulf between many members of the academy and Australia's professional armed forces grew out of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Although in the time since Vietnam more military history has been written in Australia than in all the years before, paradoxically the majority of academic historians have shunned the study of this most extreme aspect of human experience. In contemporary universities military history is rarely taught and when it is, it appears as a subset of social history rather than a topic worthy of study in its own right. This neglect is a damning indictment of a profession whose reason for being is to examine all aspects of human experience.

It was not always so. C. E. W. Bean and his colleagues set a remarkable precedent for the contribution that contemporary military historians might make to chronicling one of the most turbulent aspects of our history. The individual services have encouraged the writing of history, but with the exception of Robert O'Neill's history of his battalion in Vietnam and Bob Breen's work on the Unified Task Force (UNITAF) deployment to Somalia and his more recent work on the ADF in East Timor, the last forty years have seen very little active involvement by

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<sup>27</sup> Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', p. 217.

historians in military operations.<sup>28</sup> Not only has the historical profession paid little attention to the need for trained military historians, but the armed forces have lost sight of the need to make provision for the involvement of historians in operations.

Another way in which historical information is used is to determine basic laws of combat behaviour. This approach is best typified by the work of Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, who founded the Historical Evaluation and Research Organization in the US in 1965. Dupuy has been a contentious figure in historical circles, having developed a ‘Quantified Judgement Model’ that ‘provides a basis for comparing the relative combat power of two opposing forces in historical combat by determining the influence of variable factors upon the opponents’.<sup>29</sup> Dupuy argues that:

[T]he military analyst must develop combat hypotheses by means of patterns discerned from studying large quantities of combat data. The approach is to use the data as the basis for an objective and scientific comprehensive analysis, seeking patterns, trends, and relationships to provide the basis for the hypotheses. Alternative hypotheses are then tested against the data. As more data is available for study, confidence in the validity of the hypotheses increases.<sup>30</sup>

The objective of this approach is to be able to project forward what Dupuy calls the ‘timeless verities of combat’ in order to forecast what variables will affect combat performance. Using this

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<sup>28</sup> Respectively Robert O’Neill, *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966–67*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1968; Bob Breen, *A little bit of hope: Australian Force—Somalia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998; Bob Breen, *Mission Accomplished, East Timor: The Australian Defence Force Participation in the International Forces East Timor*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001. For a discussion of the Australian Army’s record of encouraging the writing of history see David Horner, ‘Writing History in the Australian Army’, *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1993, p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> Colonel T. N. Dupuy, *Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat*, Leo Cooper, London, 1992, p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

method, Dupuy claims, will enable military planners to forecast realistic rates of advance in combat, as well as attrition rates for personnel, weapons and equipment. Dupuy suggests that the method can also help illuminate such questions as: ‘assessing the relative combat effectiveness of national forces; analysis of variable factors in combat such as surprise and fatigue; [and] determination of the ability of a force to inflict casualties’.<sup>31</sup> The Historical Analysis Branch of the Centre for Defence Analysis has undertaken similar work in Britain.<sup>32</sup>

Quantitative analysis is certainly useful, not least in laying ‘sacred cows’ to rest. Dupuy has demonstrated that ‘heroic’ narratives of battle that purport to show that relative numerical strength is not important in determining victory are quite simply incorrect. Similarly, his results show that, where victors are outnumbered by their opponents, they will invariably possess combat power superiority in some other area.<sup>33</sup> He has also pointed out that the fundamental assumptions used in many computerised model simulations of combat have incorrectly reflected real-life combat advance and attrition rates.<sup>34</sup> Acceptance of these models could have potentially disastrous consequences if staffs were to base plans or policy decisions on them.

Despite these achievements, there is something limiting about this approach. Richard Holmes writes that ‘this method of analysis tells us as much about the nature of battle as a gynaecological

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<sup>31</sup> Colonel T.N. Dupuy, ‘History and Modern Battle’, *Army*, November 1982, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> See Stephen Tetlow, ‘Incorporating human factors in simulation: A British Army view’, in Michael Evans and Alan Ryan (eds), *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 25–36.

<sup>33</sup> Dupuy, *Understanding War*, pp. xxiv–xxv.

<sup>34</sup> Colonel T. N. Dupuy, ‘Can We Rely Upon Computer Combat Simulations?’, *Armed Forces Journal International*, August 1987, pp. 58–63.



textbook does about the nature of human eroticism'.<sup>35</sup> Quantitative analysis is another tool in the historian's box, but as Dupuy's own hero, Clausewitz, has pointed out, warfare is a political act. Waging war is about a great deal more than the battlefield. While the cold, hard data of combat can be reduced to force, strength and firepower ratios, there are a great many more variables that affect how people behave when thrust into armed conflict with each other. We might be able to model a complex conflict such as the resistance of the East Timorese to Indonesian occupation, but the question remains whether we would want to. One is reminded of Dustin Hoffman in the film *Marathon Man*. To look as if he had been up all night being tortured and chased through New York, he went without sleep and jogged from dusk till dawn. Witnessing this performance, Laurence Olivier is said to have commented, 'Very laudable, dear boy, but why don't you try acting some time'. History is like that: there are many methods available to the historian—in the end most historians will apply the tools that are the most appropriate and probably the least taxing.

Reflecting on the catastrophic French defeat in 1940, one of the most famous of French historians, Marc Bloch, blamed the collapse of the French Army in part on the failure to learn from history.

A decorated veteran of both wars, who later joined the resistance, was captured, tortured and executed by the Gestapo, Bloch had a ringside seat as a staff officer in the debacle. He pointed out that history had been used between the wars to confirm the expectation that the next war would be very much like the last. A founding member of the famous *Annales* school, he had argued that the role of the historian was to overcome the deep schisms that divide specialists from each other and to promote the

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<sup>35</sup> Holmes, *Firing Line*, p. 12.

understanding of human behaviour across time.<sup>36</sup> By comparison, the species of history taught in French military schools was calcified and didactic, and had not taken into account the variables that the passage of time had introduced. He pointed out that:

[T]he historian is well aware that no two successive wars are ever the same war, because, in the period between them, a number of modifications have occurred in the social structures of the countries concerned, in the progress of technical skill, and in the minds of men.<sup>37</sup>

Bloch suggested that the proper use of history in strategic planning was not to identify 'lessons learnt'. He rejected the notion that an awareness of past events provided some kind of route map for the present. He pointed out that any strategic planner needed an 'elastic mind' to conceive the 'facts' behind the bland symbols of troop movements and logistical resources. Knowledge of historical variables breeds intellectual flexibility, so the advantage of Bloch's flexible mind is that, by:

examining how and why yesterday differed from the day before, it can reach conclusions which will enable it to foresee how to-morrow will differ from yesterday . . . History is, in the truest sense, an experimental science, because, by studying real events, and by bringing intelligence to bear on problems of analytical comparison, it succeeds in discovering, with ever-increasing accuracy, the parallel movements of cause and effect.<sup>38</sup>

Bloch's suggestion was that historical learning could be applied in a positive way to inform strategic and operational judgments. It is particularly important that decision makers are provided with this facility during a time of strategic change or uncertainty. This is the situation that confronts Australia today. In the current international security environment the ADF can expect to be

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<sup>36</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1962.

<sup>37</sup> Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1968, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

employed on a much wider range of missions than might have been expected during the Cold War. In recent years the ADF has been employed in the provision of emergency relief, peacekeeping, defence aid to the civil community and peace enforcement—as recently occurred in East Timor. The ADF’s strategic priority, however, continues to be framed by a policy of Defeating Attacks on Australia (DAA). If Australian forces are to be expected to meet the new array of challenges that face them, commanders and their staffs are going to have to be equipped with a far higher level of situational awareness than is currently the case. This is where trained military historians can be of use.

On contemporary military operations there are a range of functions that military historians can perform that have not been previously considered, by either the ADF or Australian historians themselves. These functions are not novel and are firmly embedded in US military doctrine. Just a few of the roles that can be performed by field historians include:

- recording events as they occur in a form that historians and analysts can use, both immediately and with the luxury of hindsight;
- providing advice on the historical context of events as they occur and their implications for the future;
- recording experiences for future doctrine and capability development;
- advising commanders and their staffs on historical matters, including the application of past ‘lessons learnt’ to current operations;
- assisting commanders and their staffs to meet their statutory responsibilities for recording their actions and activities;
- collecting historical materials from an operation for use in ADF training and eventual deposit in the Australian War Memorial or other relevant repositories. These might include documents,

digitised records, maps, map overlays, newspapers, videos, sound recordings and photographs;

- advising units on the preparation of their own historical records; and
- identifying and collecting other historical artefacts.

The contribution that the historian can make is not limited to preparing historical narratives with the wisdom born of retrospection. Michael Howard argued that historians study events in width, breadth and context.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps alone on military operations they have the luxury of stepping back from involvement in the intensive operational tempo and devoting some time to contextualising what it is that their force is doing. There is, of course, a question as to how objective a historian can be on operations. While it can be argued that a historian deployed with a military force has demonstrably chosen ‘a side’, how different is that from the modern-day historian who writes about German military operations in World War II? Geoffrey Barraclough pointed out in his classic work *An Introduction to Contemporary History* that: ‘Whatever may be the problems of writing contemporary history, the fact remains . . . that, from the time of Thucydides onwards, much of the greatest history has been contemporary history.’<sup>40</sup>

### **Thinking ‘across time’ on military operations? the value of instant history**

What is it that a historian can do to ‘value add’ to a military operation? After all, the public perception of the military historian’s craft is mostly shaped by a contemplation of compendious and often dusty tomes. While operations are in progress there is no time or adequate access for an historian to build detailed and authoritative narratives to form the basis of

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<sup>39</sup> Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, pp. 215–7.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Nature of Contemporary History*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 15.

analysis. My feeling is that whatever a deployed historian does must be regarded as a work in progress: authoritative history is best recollected in tranquillity, and a historian sent with laptop in hand into a theatre of operations will not have the opportunity to research the whole picture. On the other hand, it is just as likely that the historian will have had the opportunity to analyse more evidence about the operation than anyone else. Consequently, from the advisory point of view, as opposed to the collection of source materials, a historian is well placed to conduct concurrent operations analyses for the force commander and his staff.

At the moment the historian's ability to think temporally is not provided for in Australian operational doctrine and planning, though it is an accepted part of US Army operations. That this might represent something of a deficiency has gone unnoticed in the ADF for over twenty years? largely because, in the absence of major overseas deployments, there had been no great demand for the systematic creation of an operational historical record. The responsibility for providing leadership to INTERFET changed all that, and the ADF found itself with shortcomings in its ability to maintain an accurate record of events, much less derive wisdom from that knowledge. This situation was not due to a lack of effort since large numbers of people were engaged in recording aspects of the operation. Much of that effort was, however, wasted due to a lack of coordination, a general lack of expertise and the absence of any guiding doctrine to help inform the activities that took place. A brief sample of some of the research projects associated with the Australian contribution to the international coalition that restored order to East Timor in 1999 (Operation *Stabilise*) demonstrates this point.

On behalf of the Australian Army's think-tank, the Land Warfare Studies Centre (LWSC), I was commissioned to investigate the formation and performance of the INTERFET coalition in East Timor. There were undoubted advantages in having a recognised

status as a Defence Department historian. The most notable advantage was access to sources that a historian writing after the event could not have. These sources included an initial briefing by the Director General INTERFET in Strategic Command in Australian Defence Headquarters; much of the documented correspondence concerning the establishment of the coalition; and interviews with key Defence personnel here in Australia as well as in Timor while the operation was in progress. Most importantly I was able to interview the commanders of many of the other national contingents participating in the force. It became obvious that, apart from the commander and his immediate staff who would be fully engaged in running the operation and managing the coalition relationship, only a historical investigator could achieve such a high level of access to so many participants and sources. Taken together with some prior expertise in the issue under consideration (in my case coalition peace operations), a military historian is in an excellent position to provide advice to a commander and his staff. Just as importantly the historian can provide evidence and analysis that might influence how others perceive the operation.

My job of examining the single issue of coalition performance was a very specific task and did not equate to the function of providing historical support to the deployed force. Because of the limited nature of the research my interviews in East Timor were completed in a week. The research did, however, provide the opportunity to examine what analytical skills were needed in an operational environment and question what further contributions the application of the historian's craft might make.

The task of providing historical support to the Australian forces deployed in East Timor was undertaken by an element of the Army History Unit (AHU), which was deployed to Dili on 29 October. Consisting in the first instance of Lieutenant Colonel Bill Houston and Warrant Officer Joe Lindford, this detachment's primary

responsibility was to ensure that there would be sufficient documentation, data and other evidence available for future researchers. The AHU:

- advised and supervised the compilation of Commander's Diaries;
- conducted oral-history interviews at all levels within the Australian contingent;
- advised on the collection of artefacts for museums, including the Australian War Memorial and Army Museums; and
- hosted the war artists sent by the Australian War Memorial as well as two other historians.

Apart from myself, the other visiting historian was the Australian Army's Land Command Historian, Colonel Bob Breen. Colonel Breen spent ten weeks in Timor between December 1999 and February 2000 conducting interviews, visiting units and observing their operations and reviewing headquarters records and databases. This research has already resulted in the publication of an unofficial, commercially published illustrated history of the operation, which is to be the first of two books to be written on the topic by the author. Titled *Mission Accomplished, East Timor*, this work was written 'to commemorate . . . [the] . . . episode and to tell the story of the ADF participation in the INTERFET campaign.'<sup>41</sup> The book is an excellent example of 'instant' narrative history but, as its author points out, it is an early attempt based on the limited body of material available at the time. In his acknowledgments, Colonel Breen admits that this form of narrative is only a beginning and *Mission Accomplished* does not attempt much analysis of operations, nor does it examine the coalition relationship in any detail.

The military historians were not the only people gathering data on Operation *Stabilise*. The Combined Arms Training and

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<sup>41</sup> Breen, *Mission Accomplished, East Timor*, ix.

Development Centre (CATDC) deployed a multidisciplinary, twelve-person Land Operations Analysis Team (LOAT), which arrived in East Timor on 16 November. It was tasked with the dual role of collecting immediate lessons for follow-on forces expecting to be sent there and the longer-term aim of gathering information to assist in the formulation of future military doctrine. The team concentrated on capturing environmental, tactical, administrative, civil affairs and coalition lessons. While this was really a work of mission analysis, it was of immediate and practical utility. Australian troops arrived in Dili only five days after the passage of the Security Council resolution authorising the operation. The conditions confronting these troops as they moved into the interior and came into contact with hostile militias were quite novel and the ADF wished to ensure that their successors learnt from their experience.

The work done by the LWSC and that undertaken by the AHU, Colonel Breen and the Combined Arms Training and Development Centre (CATDC) differed in a number of respects. Each of us was working at a different level and with different objectives, though to the outside observer it might have appeared that researchers were popping up everywhere making a nuisance of themselves by asking questions. While my work concentrated on the point where strategic issues impacted on operational performance, the CATDC was working on strictly operational and tactical questions. The AHU was working on recording anecdotes and impressions of military personnel and ensuring that adequate records were kept for future investigators and for statutory heritage purposes. Colonel Breen's objective was to ensure that an accurate account of events was made available, and he accomplished this objective by focusing on personal experiences of the operation. Though each of these research projects served distinct functions, clearer demarcation, common doctrine and joint exercises prior to an operation would greatly enhance how the various investigators required on operations go about the business of recording events and assessing outcomes.



Research projects were not confined to the theatre of operations. As the operation progressed, it seemed as if every man and his dog was conducting a 'lessons learnt' study. The deployment to East Timor involved a wide range of government departments, most notably the departments of Defence; Foreign Affairs and Trade; and the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Given that this was the ADF's largest overseas deployment since Vietnam and the first time that Australia had commanded a major multinational coalition (ultimately comprising twenty-two countries), every organisation and branch involved wanted to validate its own processes by gathering information on its performance. Again, very little of this activity counted as history; it was more a review of staff processes. When these studies finally become available to the broader community of historians, they will no doubt provide valuable source material, but none of these studies was coherent outside the limitations of their own functional area. Nor could it be said that these projects painted an overall picture of 'what actually happened' when Australia sent its troops to East Timor.

A fundamental criticism of the process of gathering information and writing reports about this operation was that there was no central coordination of these disparate activities. To mount and lead a multinational operation on the scale of Operation *Stabilise* requires a 'whole-of-government' effort. There is limited value in collecting lessons out of context. Certainly there was little objectivity in the exercise since most of those who were tasked to record events were reporting on their own efforts and those of their colleagues. Such reports are blinkered by dint of a restricted perspective and an inability to access the widest possible range of relevant sources. This observation does not diminish the value of the work that was done, but it does demonstrate the difference between the collation of data, opinion and short-term lessons from what it is that historians do. Adopting Arthur Marwick's definition of the discipline, history is what we know of the past:

from the interpretations of historians based on the critical study of the widest possible range of relevant sources, every effort having been made to challenge, and avoid the perpetuation of myth.<sup>42</sup>

While a post-activity report may help a particular working group to understand what happened to them, it does very little to enhance our appreciation of why it happened or its broader context. Very rarely will such a report challenge what J. K. Galbraith calls the 'institutional truths' that permeate every organisation.

### **The military historian on operations**

The military historian deployed on operations is in an extraordinary position. Perhaps more than for any other historian, the subject matter is so fresh and the sources so readily available that the greatest challenge for the military historian is to maintain the ability to discriminate with all the evidence and opinion that is present. To make sense of contemporary history and to best preserve it for future analysis and interpretation, it is essential to involve trained historians in capturing the contemporary historical record and in providing critical interpretation of the events that occurred.

One problem that we currently face in Australia is that we have no doctrine for military-history operations. Lieutenant Colonel Bill Houston, the Army History Unit representative in East Timor, took a copy of the US Army's draft Field Manual for military history with him. It is of interest that he downloaded this valuable resource from the US Army's Military History website.<sup>43</sup> This publication proved very useful to those of us conducting operational research for the first time. It seems odd that, despite a great deal of operational experience this century, the ADF still has

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3rd edn, Macmillan London, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Department of the Army, US Army Forces Command, FM 20-17, Military History Operations, final draft, Headquarters US Army Forces Command, Fort McPherson, GA, October 1998.

to fall back on using a US-sourced document. In the Australian War Memorial there is displayed a large wall chart drawn up for C. E. W. Bean that details how he structured his staff and the tasks they performed. Nothing so organised seems to have been attempted since. The deployment of historians with INTERFET was strictly ad hoc, and while Lieutenant Colonel Houston successfully identified and gathered source material for future researchers, it was a process that the AHU had to make up as they went along.

Most historians would question the need for procedures and guidance—what the military calls doctrine—to direct the way we do our research. From experience it is necessary. The operational environment is very different from the tranquil atmosphere of the archives. Many of the people tasked with collecting information at unit level are not professional historians and require detailed guidance as to what they need to gather and how they should do it. Very often, their priority is survival, not paperwork. Not only is there potential danger and discomfort on operations, but the pace at which events occur is often considerably more rapid than in civil life.

One particularly disturbing aspect of the contemporary operational environment for historians is the way in which data is stored. In the modern digitised military headquarters much less information finds its way onto paper than in the past. A great threat to maintaining the historical record is the propensity of the staff officer to wipe the contents of his or her laptop computer as they depart the theatre of operations. Records can be amassed on computers by simply updating the previous day's brief rather than copying, amending and archiving records. Such anthologising can lead to the creation of a very different record than was the case when individual situation reports were created for each day's events. Similarly, soldiers do not write home or keep diaries—now they send emails. The information age offers both great

opportunities for contemporary historians and a potential desert for those investigators who get there too late. The upside of the innovations in information technology is that historians have a novel opportunity to produce accessible, interactive sources of historical information and that, as the keepers of the institutional memory, they have a greater chance of providing ‘real time’ advice to decision makers than ever before.

The professional historian also has a vital role in providing a fresh perspective outside the usual staff and intelligence processes. Modern commanders are confronted by a new twist on the ‘fog of war’. Where in the past military forces often worked in an information vacuum—forced to second-guess their opponents, the weather, the terrain and their allies—modern commanders are, if anything, embarrassed by the sheer volume of data available to them. Historians attached to a headquarters, but with a watching brief independent of traditional staff processes, can identify and investigate issues that others more submerged in the day-to-day processes of the headquarters might miss.

A particular instance of the value of having an otherwise non-committed commentator is on coalition operations, when the success of the mission is often reliant on maintaining the cohesion of the combined force. Freed from the need to micro-manage relationships, the historian can provide objective and immediate feedback to the commander as to how coalition partners perceive the operation. The sensitivity of various issues that arise within a coalition may not allow immediate publication of the historian’s findings. The operational historian may, however, be able to provide advice that will allow a commander to take remedial action. Information provided by an observer with an eye to history can be vital in the image management that is almost as much a criterion of operational success today as is victory in battle.

The draft US publication used by the AHU in East Timor points out that:

The historian can assist in the unit's critical analysis of its operations. In executing all inherent duties, the historian will soon become one of the most knowledgeable members of the staff. The historian can compare decisions and actions that are planned through a study of past operations. Historical studies on the unit's plans, policies, and doctrinal issues can enhance a unit's performance. By attending staff meetings and operational briefings, the unit historian can determine which material would be beneficial and provide it in a timely manner to influence the decision-making process. The historian must use initiative and be aggressive to perform this role; other staff members will not seek out the historian during the planning process.<sup>44</sup>

A historian on a military operation also has a peculiar status. Most people involved in Operation *Stabilise* were more than willing to talk to a historian—often to vent their frustrations, but also, quite understandably, to record their opinions for posterity. In almost all cases the interactions were constructive; I received a very strong impression that many contingent commanders felt that an official historian would have some influence. Accordingly interviews were yet another way of developing understanding within the coalition and were an informal mode of communication at a reasonably senior level. If in a unilateral operation the historian has a role in maintaining the institutional memory of the force, on a combined operation the historian has a potential role in building cross-cultural understanding. Operation *Stabilise* was the first time Australia had ever acted as lead nation in a multinational force, and given the disparate nature of the countries represented and the fact that Australia provided the force headquarters, concurrent evaluation of the relationships within the coalition was essential.

Away from the operational environment the 'instant' historian is unlikely to prove popular with all readers. Writing so close to events, the researcher must make abrupt assessments about what is

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

important to those who need some form of historical ‘product’? a process quite remote from the usually more detached and scholarly contemplation of sources at a distance of space and time. Recent experience has shown that the instant historian is likely to come in for criticism from within the defence organisation for not satisfying the demands of all potential stakeholders. Those whose contribution is not recognised, or worse, determined to be inadequate are likely to be annoyed or even vengeful for their treatment at the hands of the historian. Similarly, instant history is widely considered to be more sensational than objective studies of events turned cold by the passage of time. Contemporary historical writing can often be bowdlerised and misrepresented in the media. Nonetheless, it is better to have at least some scholarship than none at all. Adapting Dag Hammarskjöld’s famous maxim about military peacekeepers, instant history may be no job for historians, but only historians can do it. Historians have often been unpopular in the past; the fact that they will attract criticism is probably an accurate measure of their effectiveness in calling institutional truths into question.

### **The US Army model of military-history operations and its lessons for the ADF**

Undoubtedly some would regard a historian on a military operation as an unwanted piece of baggage or a luxury. The US Army’s draft manual titled *Military History Operations* cautions that ‘Operational commands do not always fully appreciate the benefits and value of taking historians on operations.’<sup>45</sup> The same document does, however, clearly establish the contribution that the historian can make:

The historian maintains the institutional memory of the command and ensures the use of historical information, insights, and perspective in the decision-making process and in other functions

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

and programs. The historian uses military history to improve training, support leader development, promote morale and esprit de corps, and foster historical mindedness among all members of the command.<sup>46</sup>

Typically, perhaps, the US military has a very positive perception of the role that historical specialists can play. This vision is not shared in Australia, where at the very best there is a feeling that records should be kept but without any clear idea as to how this information can be used. What is more, the point is made that, unlike my experience in East Timor, what the ADF requires is not a civilian historian who runs in, conducts interviews and leaves, but a military-history detachment that is deployed with the force, serves with it for the duration of the operation and is an integral part of the staff.

It is no good placing a military neophyte in the role of operational historian, just as people without the appropriate qualifications and experience would not be expected to serve as lawyers and doctors in the military. Operational historical duties are so far from archival research, university teaching and other aspects of civil history as to require specialist expertise. The US Army's doctrine emphasises that knowledge and appreciation of military command and administrative structures, tactics and culture is as least as important as possessing the necessary professional academic training in the historian's craft.<sup>47</sup> The US Army—a much larger organisation than the ADF—has both command historians attached to units and larger formations and 'Military History Detachments' that are deployed into the theatre of operations. Such an arrangement is not necessary in Australia. With only one Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (DJFHQ) it makes sense that, in any contingency requiring a historical team, they would form a part of this organisation or of any equivalent operational

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

headquarters that might be deployed. Ideally, an Australian military-history detachment would have been exercised as a part of the DJFHQ and would be integrated into its processes. As stated in the US doctrine:

Prior to any contingency, the historian must be personally familiar with the key commanders and staff and have a regular working relationship with them. The historian must be familiar with the decision-making process of the command and attend key sessions, taking note of the conversations, which are often not recorded in any other medium. The historian should deploy with the unit . . . to ensure that the historical record of that operation, contingency, or war is properly preserved.<sup>48</sup>

The US Army example provides a practical precedent for an ADF military-history detachment. With a much wider range of operational deployments throughout the world, the US Army deploys three-person teams to ‘each theater army, corps, division, separate combined arms brigade, armored cavalry regiment, and logistical or support command.’<sup>49</sup> These historical teams consist of a major with training in historical research, a sergeant photojournalist and a specialist clerk–typist who is the unit records manager. All unit personnel are cross-trained ‘to conduct interviews, take photographs, advise on records management, and provide historical information’.<sup>50</sup> Military-history detachments are highly mobile, with their own vehicle and are self-sufficient in equipment, which includes still and video cameras, audio recorders and computer equipment. To facilitate the copying of data, the computer equipment is compatible with the formation with which the team is deployed.

The military-history detachment remains only one of the different teams that the US army deploys to theatres of operations to study events. The primary mission of the history detachment is to

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



‘collect, preserve, and assist or advise’ on military-history matters. They ‘cover’ the operations of the units and formations to which they are attached and use their integral mobility to operate throughout the area of operations of the supported unit. Once attached to a unit the detachment commander works to the command historian who is a permanent staff officer in the headquarters. Accordingly, the detachment is not so much a staff asset as a research entity. Historical advice to the commander is provided by that formation’s historian.<sup>51</sup> Apart from the command historian and the mobile detachment, units are also likely to be visited by Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) teams, whose role is to bring specific expertise to bear on particular issues and to disseminate their findings to the entire Army as soon as possible. These teams equate to the LOAT deployed to East Timor by the CATDC, just as the AHU is the Australian version of the US Center of Military History. Whatever their specific focus, and although their missions vary significantly in terms of their intent, approach and outcomes, all field researchers need to coordinate their activities for efficiency’s sake and in order to avoid overexposure. As US doctrine points out:

A lack of coordination will bring about resentment from the supported unit when the same commanders and soldiers are subjected to multiple interviews, the same documents are copied numerous times, and more visitors enter already busy operations centers.<sup>52</sup>

Where historians work within a headquarters, they are in an extraordinary position to collect information on operations. Information collection within a headquarters is rarely holistic; therefore the historian who attends briefings and meetings has a

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

unique opportunity to gather primary evidence, not only as to what was decided but also how and why decisions were made. US command historians have had their responsibilities spelt out in detail, and their role as an integral part of the functioning of the headquarters is an excellent model for the ADF to emulate. Similarly, the US focus on investigating not only their own actions but those of coalition partners enables them to recover the ‘whole story’ of the operations in which they are involved. The sheer volume and high standard of US writing on recent military operations serves as the exemplar for any defence force that is serious about self-criticism and analysis.

### **Conclusion? a proposal for a deployable ADF military-history detachment**

The nature of military operations is that they usually involve life-and-death decisions and very often relate directly to matters of vital national interest. It seems odd then that we have adopted such an ad hoc approach to collecting historical evidence and chronicling it in circumstances when Australians are sent in harm’s way. The ADF requires trained historians who are also staff officers and who are expressly tasked to carry out this mission.

What is required is not a massive staff organisation, or even a standing unit, but a skeleton organisation that would have a pre-identified establishment. ADF operations are generally joint; it would therefore not be necessary to establish service-specific historical teams. Given that the regular component of the ADF is already overstretched and understaffed, it is unlikely that the ADF can support a viable career profile for professional historians in uniform. I suggest that a historical detachment could be formed as a part of the DJFHQ, but would only need to concentrate and train with the headquarters on an annual or even biennial basis. In the meantime its members could get on with their ordinary careers. Such a unit would need to be commanded by a staff-trained

regular officer with postgraduate qualifications in history. Ideally, this officer would be at least a lieutenant colonel/commander/wing commander equivalent and could be drawn from the staff of any of the service think-tanks or be a serving member of an organisation such as the AHU. Both Australian and US experience has demonstrated that the authority associated with rank is necessary to guarantee the level of access and ‘pull’ to carry out meaningful research as well as to be capable of providing advice to commanders.

The rest of the unit would not even need to serve full time in the ADF. In the same way that medical and legal professionals support ADF operations as reservists, the remaining historians specifically tasked to conduct military-history operations could be maintained in the Reserves. A pool of reserve personnel who possess military backgrounds and professional historical training might be identified in the universities and the service think-tanks, and they could be recruited and held on establishment for deployment on operations. For a deployment on the scale of Operation *Stabilise*, a detachment of three historians supported by a photographer and two or three clerk–drivers would be more than adequate to carry out the military-history function. Such an organisation would be a remarkably inexpensive way of achieving what is an extremely valuable contribution to the ADF’s information resources.

Historical actors can only improve their performance by ‘thinking in time’. Being able to introduce temporal awareness is not just a pursuit for egg-heads. The well-known combat soldier John Essex-Clark once wrote: ‘An officer should study military history as avidly as he should study current doctrines and techniques in other nations’ forces and trends and ideas in military materiel research and development.’<sup>53</sup> The first step to learning from

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<sup>53</sup> John Essex-Clark, *Maverick Soldier*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1991, p. 222.

history is to develop greater self-awareness through formal processes of analysis. In an increasingly uncertain strategic and global environment, it seems likely that the ADF will be confronted with more and varied operational tasks than in the past. The rigorous interpretative skills and contextual knowledge of the historian's craft should be applied to clarify and resolve the problems that an uncertain future brings. As the US Army has concluded:

Military history is a long-term and subtle, but extremely important combat multiplier. Military historians, through their historical programs, contribute to operations while recording data for American society to foster public support for the military. Provisions for military history operations must be included in campaign and contingency plans in order to ensure that the historical record is accurately and completely recorded. This historical collection effort will meet the immediate and future information needs of soldiers and the public.<sup>54</sup>

In the past the ADF has made do with ad hoc and amateur efforts at military-history operations. If in the future we expect our commanders and soldiers to 'think across time', as well as across space, the ADF needs to adopt a much more professional approach to the business of history.

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<sup>54</sup> FM 20-17, *Military History Operations*, p. 40.