

Land Warfare Studies Centre

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**‘Putting Your Young Men in the Mud’
Change, Continuity and the
Australian Infantry Battalion**

by

Alan Ryan

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About the Author

Dr Alan Ryan is a Senior Research Fellow in the LWSC. With Dr Michael Evans he coedited *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle*. Other recent works examine post–Cold War coalition operations; Australian participation in operations in East Timor; the use of historical analysis on operations; and asymmetric warfare. He is currently coediting with Michael Evans a book entitled *Future Armies, Future Challenges: Land Warfare in the Information Age*.

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Land Warfare Studies Centre

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Comment on this working paper is welcome and should be forwarded in writing to:

The Publications Manager
Land Warfare Studies Centre
Ian Campbell Road
DUNTROON ACT 2600
Australia

Telephone: (02) 6265 9471
Facsimile: (02) 6265 9888
Email:
<ara.nalbandian@defence.gov.au>

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

1ATF	1st Australian Task Force
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
APC	Armoured Personnel Carriers
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
DSTO	Defence Science and Technology Organisation
FGA	fighter ground attack
JDAM	joint direct-attack munition
LMG	light machine-guns
MOLE	manoeuvre operations in a littoral environment
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OOTW	operations other than war
RMA	Revolution in Military Affairs
RPG	rocket-propelled grenades
TFM	Task Force Modernisation Mission
VC	Viet Cong

ABSTRACT

Over the past 100 years, the manner in which the infantry battalion is employed has undergone revolutionary change—something that is not always appreciated by those who regard the infantry as the unskilled labour force of the battlefield. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. This paper discusses the implications of the transition from relatively unskilled mass industrial-age infantry to the information-age specialists who dominate the modern battlespace. Oddly, these changes have not been reflected in a fundamental reassessment of the role of the battalion in the Army's order of battle. This paper examines the key historical influences on the employment of the infantry battalion in the modern period. These influences include the ongoing and relentless decentralisation of tactical formations, the ever-increasing precision and the lethal nature of weapon systems, and the exponential growth and availability of battlespace communications.

The paper suggests that the inherited doctrinal guidance concerning the organisational structures and employment of Australia's infantry battalions is of limited use in information-age conflicts. The Australian Army needs to reassess the role that rigid and inflexible organisational structures play in the tactical employment of infantry, and import those findings into its doctrinal and training regimes.

What is more, the presence of infantry is an essential precondition for most operations across the spectrum of conflict. Without them our deployed forces would be vulnerable to attack, and our attempts to establish and maintain conditions of basic security would be hardly credible. Whether in conventional war, or the range of operations other than war, the infantry remains the most sophisticated and adaptable combat capability.

Technological changes have not done away with the need for combat troops that can engage in close combat. As the Australian Army investigates ways of ‘hardening’ its combat forces, a major priority will be to enhance the level of mobility and protection available to the most vulnerable soldiers on the battlefield—the infantry. By examining the evolving character of infantry combat, the paper provides an initial concept for the employment of foot soldiers in a hardened Army. Although the ways in which future infantry might fight are likely to continue to change, the circumstances of contemporary conflict require higher-quality infantry than ever before. In order to continue to provide for national security and to maintain the capability to project power, the Australian Defence Force needs to continue to generate sufficient numbers of highly trained infantry who can prosecute and prevail in the close battle.

‘PUTTING YOUR YOUNG MEN IN THE MUD’: CHANGE, CONTINUITY AND THE AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BATTALION

‘Got any idea what it takes to be a soldier?’

‘No’, I admitted.

‘Most people think that all it takes is two hands and two feet and a stupid mind. Maybe so, for cannon fodder. Possibly that was all that Julius Caesar required. But a private soldier today is a specialist so highly skilled that he would rate “master” in any other trade . . . ’

Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, 1959¹

‘The ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with a gun.’

Rear Admiral J. C. Wylie, United States Navy²

Are infantry obsolete?

It became fashionable during the nuclear age to argue that the foot soldier was no longer required in the wars of mass annihilation that appeared to represent the future of armed conflict. As a result of the Revolution in Military Affairs initiated by the information age, there is a tendency to focus on the battlespace awareness and stand-off weapons precision provided by technology and to depreciate the effectiveness of the vulnerable, foot-mobile soldier. Certainly, a great deal has happened in human conflict since the first formed units of armed men made collective butchery the prevailing characteristic of the ancient

¹ Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, (1959) Ace Books, New York, 1987, p. 27.

² Cited in Colin S. Gray, ‘The Revolution in Military Affairs’, in Brian Bond and Mungo Melvin (eds), *The Nature of Future Conflict: Implications for Force Development*, The Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, Occasional paper no. 36, Camberley, Surrey, September 1998, p. 65.

battlefield. Different arms and services have enabled combat to be waged in the air, at sea and on land; at ever-increasing speed; with armoured protection; and at great distances. This paper makes the point that, in the complex environment of contemporary conflict, there remain many roles that only the dismounted infantryman can perform and that the foot soldier remains the basic unit of force projection on land.

The ability to prosecute close combat remains the final determinant in warfare, and this task ultimately falls on the infantry. However, the structure of the units in which infantrymen fight will continue to undergo change, as it has always done. The capabilities available to infantry units will change at the same rate as innovative technologies are introduced into civil life—which is to say, at an ever-accelerating rate. The way in which infantry units will go about their work and the expectations that their employers place on them will also continue to undergo radical change. The one certainty about the role of the infantry in an uncertain world is that we will continue to need them, and that, as long as violence for political ends exists, we will never have enough of them.

An examination of the historical development of the infantry battalion over the past century suggests that the battalion of the future will be more like the mobile infantry of Robert Heinlein's classic science-fiction book *Starship Troopers* than the standard organisation with which we are all familiar. To make this observation is not to be provocative; in fact most of the predictions made in that book—which was written in 1959—have already come to fruition. The mobility, firepower and battlefield communications that are available to information-age infantry enable even the smallest units to wield combat power undreamt of only a few years ago. After a generation in which the role of

Australian infantry was dramatically circumscribed by a one-dimensional defensive policy that focused on interdicting invaders at sea, foot soldiers are in greater demand than ever. Current operations have demonstrated that, no matter where they manifest themselves on the spectrum of conflict, human affairs are decided on land. Consequently, if we are to be able to provide security, resolve conflict or destroy enemies, we must be capable of projecting power on land. The infantryman is the nation's basic unit of mobility and force projection. He can go anywhere on land with a dexterity that no machine can match. Using the weapons that he carries on him, he can compel others to do his bidding and he can kill those who would do him harm.

Armed with modern communications, a single soldier can identify targets with greater reliability than any other sensor system and can direct firepower to achieve intended effects. Formed into sub-units and units, the collective strength of the infantry is its ability to wield lethal force with precision and discrimination in those places where no aircraft, armoured vehicle or remotely controlled platform can go. Where armed conflict occurs, whether it be in jungle, cities or open savannah, there will always be a need for infantrymen to carry their weapons forward to impose their will on others.

The Chief of the Australian Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, has recently made 'hardening' the Army a priority for force and capability development. Reflecting on the need for protected mobility that was demonstrated on recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in East Timor, he concluded that:

[O]ur Army must move from a light infantry force to a light armoured force with increased protection, firepower and mobility. The alternative is for us to steadily lose capability over time as existing systems age and are overwhelmed by the emerging threat environment.³

This necessity does not mean that the Australian Army will not need infantry, or even light infantry. It does mean that we must protect our infantry better and deliver them to the fight in the peak of condition. We need to abandon the mentality that, because the infantryman's lot is difficult, the infantry should always do things the hard way. 'Hardening the Army' is in large part about lightening the infantryman's load and making Australian infantry as effective, efficient and lethal as it can be.

What the Australian people demand of their infantry, through their Government, will continue to evolve in order to meet changing strategic circumstances and, if the current pattern of deployments are any guide, there will be a greater need for foot soldiers in the future. Infantry are required for warfighting, but they are also essential on peace operations, to support joint and combined operations, and to provide security wherever national forces are deployed.

Not only must these foot soldiers undertake the age-old tasks of infantry, but they must be able to adapt in order to acquire additional skills and carry out new tasks. They have to be capable of winning in close combat with determined and skilful enemies. They will have to be peacemakers, exercising restraint and discipline in order to provide security and stability. Infantry have to protect the

³ Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, AO, Address to the United Service Institution of the ACT, 11 June 2003, viewed 10 October 2003, <www.defence.gov.au/army>.

defenceless and by their presence ensure that humanitarian relief is available to all. Foot soldiers move in three dimensions and must be able to prevail in the fourth. Yet, they are overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of young men. They need to be extremely fit, robust, flexible and disciplined. These battlefield specialists will continue to possess all of the characteristics of youth and yet we will expect more of them than ever before. The demands of contemporary operations call for intelligent, self-motivated fighting-men. It will be a challenge for our society to produce enough of them to do the tasks that are there to do.

This paper addresses the patterns of change and continuity in the structure, role and employment of the Australian infantry battalion. In the information age the pace of social, political, economic and technological change is accelerating at an exponential rate. The infantry battalion is not immune to these changes—rather they shape the environment in which the infantry operates. Addressing his own army, General Eric Shinseki, the recently retired Chief of Staff of the United States Army, pointed out that: ‘The Army must change because the nation cannot afford to have an Army that is irrelevant’.⁴

Change is an integral part of the nature of conflict and the organisations that wage conflict on our behalf must adapt if they are to prevail. This is not to say that the traditions and identity of the Army’s battalions should not be preserved. Unit identities and loyalties are the basis of collective and individual morale and they make a vital contribution to

⁴ General Eric Shinseki, State of the Army Address to the Association of the United States Army, 8 November 2001, Washington DC, viewed 7 April 2003, <<http://www.dtic.mil/armylink/news/Nov2001/r20011109csa-remarks.html>>.

combat effectiveness. However, the structure and tactics of the infantry battalion are constantly evolving, as is the infantry battalion's relationship with supporting arms. Change is inevitable; it does, however, pose a particular challenge to those who are in the business of close combat. Officers, non-commissioned officers, policy makers and force planners must be fully aware of the implications of the historical and contemporary development of the infantry arm; otherwise people—our people—are going to die.

Debate about the roles, structure and operational techniques of the basic infantry unit has gone on for at least 2500 years—ever since the hoplite phalanx formation made the collective combat ability of the common foot-soldier more than just the sum of its parts. It is a debate on which the fate of countries and empires has hinged. Only one hundred years ago, the great issue confronting infantrymen was what the introduction of the magazine-fed rifle and the maxim gun meant for the battalion. The failure to resolve this conundrum prior to 1914 resulted in attritional slaughter of a type unique in history. The twin questions of how and in what organisations infantrymen fight are not dry, technical issues. Rather, they are key factors underpinning the survival of nations. However, it is a mistake to become too attached to any one concept of what comprises a battalion. The word 'battalion' is only that—a word, an infantry fighting unit can take on many forms.

While preserving the battalion as the basis of infantry fighting capability, the various types of battalions that emerged during the 20th century had little in common with the units of the same name that had existed during the 19th century. We are on the cusp of another revolutionary change. This change is being driven by contemporary technology as well as by the nature of our civilisation. All

the indications are that the infantry fighting unit of the future will be a fundamentally different organisation from the one that we have now. The tradition of the infantryman as the hardened combat edge of the Army will survive; everything else is just baggage.

There are two types of infantry. The first of these is the mass infantry of the industrial age, easily trained and deployed in large formations. They move on foot and carry their intimate support weapons with them. The second type is the very effective, first-class infantry of the information age—highly mobile, and able to operate in small units and orchestrate effects across the full spectrum of operations. Mass infantry are obsolete, and as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated, will invariably be defeated by more intellectually adept and technologically superior forces. Information-age infantry will inherit the flexibility, the ability to discriminate and the lethality of their forebears; however, properly led, trained and organised, they will not be the cannon fodder that their less fortunate colleagues are.

This analysis of the future role of infantry necessarily examines the key historical influences that have shaped the employment of the battalion in the modern period. These influences include the ongoing and relentless decentralisation of tactical formations, the ever-increasing precision and lethal impact of weapon systems, the revolution in battlefield mobility, and the exponential growth and availability of battlespace communications. The organisation of the 20th-century infantry battalion was the product of the rapid-fire rifle. Its own organic fire capabilities and the fairly limited types of intimate supporting firepower available to it from within the division shaped the way in which the battalion was organised and employed. In order to understand how the battalion assumed

its current form, we must briefly consider the development of our own infantry units. It should then become obvious that regimental and unit traditions are not tied to what are ultimately transient establishments, but are the result of the investment of time, effort and passion of generations of soldiers in their individual units.

The novel combination of precision munitions and information-age command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities will have dramatic implications for the way in which the Australian infantry battalion of the future will carry out its missions. We inhabit an age of protean insecurity, which means that contemporary security concerns have adopted a range of different forms and characters, and are no longer easily predictable. During the Cold War, it was easy to identify the range of threats. Since 11 September 2001, it is no longer the case that states are solely preoccupied with the threats posed by other states. The reappearance of nonstate-based adversaries means that, when deployed on operations, infantrymen are increasingly unlikely to be called on to fight opponents whose tactics, formations and weapons mirror their own. It would be a mistake to underrate our enemies because they do not possess all of our technology or share our belief system. The events of 11 September 2001 and the Bali bombing of 12 October 2003 demonstrated that it is possible for those enemies to do us great harm armed only with box-cutters or bombs made with garden fertiliser.

Consequently, as a recent study published by the RAND Corporation argued, the demands of military conflict require 'military forces capable of responding to multiple, different kinds of contingencies, often involving small numbers of specialised forces in unforeseen and largely unprepared

locales, both at home and abroad'.⁵ This study suggested that future military operations will be unanticipated and short-notice; more frequent; variable in duration; and will place a premium on rapid-strike and deployment capabilities.⁶ The demands on the Australian Defence Force created by this environment are that it now has to provide forces, not for one big effort against a clearly identifiable foe, but force packages capable of being deployed to deal with a range of different, but simultaneous crises. Information-age combined-arms manoeuvre elements with a strong infantry component are precisely what these operations will require; however, the rigid and inflexible unit establishments of industrial-age warfare will not meet the needs of these contingencies.

In an age of protean insecurity, the infantry battalion is rarely likely to be employed on what used to be called 'conventional operations'. All operations will take place under 'special conditions'. The infantry battalion therefore needs the ability to be utterly flexible in carrying out its missions. It needs a modular and reconfigurable structure that is founded on an acceptance of the fact that a standard unit of approximately 700 men will rarely be the primary combat unit required for any particular mission.

In the age of mass infantry, victory belonged to the big battalions. This is no longer necessarily the case. Our troops are now being called on to fight smarter against conventional and highly vulnerable industrial-age armies, as in Iraq. At the same time, they need to be able to conduct limited war against rogue regimes, conduct peace operations and contribute to military operations that target shadowy

⁵ Lynn E. Davis and Jeremy Shapiro (eds), *The US Army and the New National Security Strategy*, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2003, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–21.

non-state actors such as terrorists and international criminal organisations. Waging combat operations successfully is no longer simply a matter of the relative size of forces engaged, but is a consequence of the effects applied to shape the desired outcome. These effects include the application of kinetic firepower and the physical presence of troops, but also involve gaining the support of domestic and international opinion, deterring attacks from those who believe that they have nothing to lose and convincing foes of one's own ability to be omnipresent. These latter factors are beyond the capability of the industrial-age battalion.

The Australian infantry battalion

It is a common part of the human condition that we tend to view the world through the prism of our own experience. Consequently, it comes as a surprise, even to many long-serving infantrymen, that the familiar structure of the Australian infantry battalion is very different from its predecessors. What is more, the standard order of battle that higher headquarters propose as the organisational template for combat units rarely survives contact with the enemy. Essentially, orders of battle are a peacetime construct, devised to assist us in our understanding of the battalion.

Called to battle, commanders are required to be creative with what they have, and will configure and reconfigure their units to achieve their missions. Nonetheless, although the neat organisational charts that purport to illustrate the order of battle of the battalion during any given period are generally only indicative, they are valuable in that they demonstrate the purpose and capabilities of these units. The development of the battalion structure is discussed in great detail in Ian Kuring's forthcoming history of Australian Infantry, *Redcoats to Cams*, and so the theme is not

developed in detail in this paper.⁷ The key theme that Kuring demonstrates in his work is that the tasks of the infantryman have become increasingly specialised and professionalised since the Australian Army was formed.

Ninety years ago the battalions that went into World War I were over a thousand men in strength and consisted of a headquarters, eight rifle companies and a machine-gun section of two heavy and relatively primitive Maxim medium machine-guns. The infantryman of 1914 was a rifleman—and effectively that is all he was. There were no grenades, no anti-armour weapons, no automatic weapons, no radio communications for him to master. Kuring has shown that the ‘rifle company consisted of three officers and 117 soldiers, and could be split into two half companies (each commanded by a subaltern), each of two sections’.⁸ The section was the smallest grouping in the rifle company at twenty-seven men and it was commanded by a sergeant.

In January 1915 the Australians adopted the new British battalion structure, which possessed four rifle companies. They made this change by amalgamating the existing companies so that the battalion remained the same size but the individual companies grew to six officers and 221 soldiers. The new structure devolved more command-and-control authority down to company level, but this battalion was still a rigid organisation designed to employ the

⁷ Ian Kuring, *Redcoats to Cams: A History of Australian Infantry 1788–2001*, Australian Military History Publications in association with the Army History Unit, Loftus, NSW, to be published in December 2003.

⁸ I am indebted to Ian Kuring for having provided me with his draft manuscript for *Redcoats to Cams*. This reference and much of the succeeding detail on the development of the Australian battalion is drawn from his scholarship and I am particularly grateful for the advice that he has so generously given me.

firepower of massed infantry. The size of the unit reflected the relative insignificance of the individual and of the small unit. It was suited to attritional conflict, but to the modern eye, it appears inefficient and wasteful.

The progress of the war led to the battalion's becoming more sophisticated in the capabilities that it contained. Battalions gave up their medium machine-guns to a machine-gun company, which was a brigade asset. In return, they received the Lewis light machine-gun, which was initially issued on the basis of one per rifle company. By late 1916 each platoon possessed its own light machine-gun. It is worth briefly considering the evolution of the infantry platoon as the basic building block of the battalion during the war. Greater command responsibility and more flexibility gradually filtered down to the junior commanders, who had to carry out the bloody business of trench warfare. In 1917 the platoon was restructured so that it consisted of four specialist sections. These roles were a light machine-gun section; a rifle grenade section; a bombing section and a rifle section. Effectively, the platoon contained two fire-support sections and two assault sections. For the first time, responsibility for fire and movement could be assigned down to platoon level, although it was an extremely unwieldy organisation.

In July 1918, the concept of specialist sections was replaced by distributing the different skills through the platoon. Platoons increasingly benefited from having two light machine-guns. This gave the platoon the ability to coordinate its fire and movement, and the multiskilling of its members allowed it to continue to fight even as it absorbed casualties. The foot soldier was on his way to becoming a more flexible, self-reliant member of a combined arms team, but the killing power of the infantry remained limited to the

weapons that they could carry. Mortars were a brigade and division asset and consequently, without dedicated indirect fire support, the tactical latitude of the battalion commander was extremely limited.

It was only in the mid-1930s that the Australian battalion organisation included a mortar platoon of four 3-inch mortars. However, during the inter-war period, there had been significant conceptual development of the role of infantry in Britain and elsewhere. These ideas led to the introduction of a new British infantry battalion organisation in 1937. To improve command and control, the number of platoons in the company was reduced to three, but this innovation was not adopted by the Australian Imperial Force Battalions until 1940 and did not take place in the Militia battalions—including those fighting in the South-West Pacific Area—until 1942. The British battalion model was far better suited to the conditions of modern war and included such specialist functions as signals, anti-aircraft, mortar, carrier and pioneer platoons. However, the Australian infantry battalions that went away at the beginning of World War II lacked most of this equipment.

The story of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) battalions in the early phases of fighting in North Africa was a tragicomic record of scrounging and recycling captured equipment. By mid-1941, the AIF battalions had adopted the British Battalion structure as far as their resources allowed. It was not until 1940 that Australia started manufacturing Bren Gun Carriers, though these soon made their appearance in North Africa and accompanied the Australians into their first action at Bardia.⁹ The appearance of these vehicles in the battalion represents a turning point in the evolution of

⁹ 'Local Pattern Carriers', viewed 20 June 2003, <<http://www.thunderandsteel.co.uk/lpc.html>>.

Australian infantry. Although the carrier platoon only possessed thirteen vehicles, these carriers did provide the battalion with a degree of battlefield mobility for the support weapons that it had not possessed before. During the Battle of Bardia on 5 January 1941, Lieutenant George Warfe, the carrier platoon commander of the 2/6th Battalion, even used them in the assault, though that was not their intended role.¹⁰

Our concept of the battalion is largely derived from the organisations that evolved during World War II. It is probably also true that we tend to romanticise what was actually an extremely utilitarian and practical structure. Most of us would be aware of ‘Jo’ Gullett’s classic description of the AIF battalion:

[A] battalion is the smallest fighting unit which may be said to be self-contained. It can feed itself, care for its sick and wounded. It has medicos, cooks, grocers, storemen, postmen, policemen, engineers and clerks, who record all things great and small. And to fill the needs of the human spirit a battalion has a padre and a band—bugles and colours to give mystique, beauty and dignity to its ceremony. It has wheels to move with, eyes and ears to see and hear with, a network to speak with and mortars to roar with. But all these amenities and services are there for one purpose, to aid, succour, and support the fists that the battalion fights with. These are its four rifle companies . . . A company is probably the largest formation in which everyone knows everyone else. It is a family.¹¹

Yet, as we have seen, battalions such as Gullett described had not existed on the Australian order-of-battle until they

¹⁰ Gavin Long, *To Benghazi, Official History of Australia in the War of 1939–45*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961, pp. 197–8.

¹¹ H. B. Gullett, *Not as a Duty Only: An Infantryman’s War*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1984, p. 2.

became a reality in late 1940. Those battalions of the Second AIF were extraordinary organisations. Away from home for the better part of five years, they had to be self-contained as they accommodated themselves to the rapidly changing operational environments in which they fought. It must be remembered, however, that they fought as only a small part of a full division and that accordingly they had access to the full range of support services and fire support that the division contained. They were still mass infantry deployed in an expeditionary role in an industrial-age conflict.

Gullett's claim that the battalion was the smallest self-contained fighting force is not true. Australia formed twelve independent companies that consisted of infantrymen. Although they were later renamed commandos, their role exceeded that of commandos. In particular, the record of the sustained and autonomous operations mounted by the 2/2nd and 2/4th Independent Companies in Timor remain one of the epic tales of small-unit infantry operations. The independent companies represent quite another kind of infantry unit that might, once again, be relevant to current operations. The companies had a strength of approximately 270 men and officers, and consisted of three platoons of sixty-seven men, each commanded by a captain. Each eighteen-man section was commanded by a lieutenant. Neither a company nor a battalion, these units were reasonably self-sufficient with a high ratio of officers, and represented a flexible and extremely potent combat capability. A modern force built on the same model and with access to precision fire-support might be even more efficient than a contemporary battalion in conducting a range of land combat tasks.

The specific conditions that confronted Australian troops conducting jungle warfare in New Guinea away from the

strong historical and doctrinal influences of the British Army led the Australian Army to develop a jungle warfare establishment for its divisional troops deployed there. The effect that this restructure had on the infantry battalion was to remove the carrier and anti-aircraft platoons and reduce the motorised transport element of the platoon. The battalion establishment remained fairly substantial at about 850 men. What was perhaps most innovative about this exercise is that, for the first time, the Australian Army dispensed with its traditional dependence on British thinking and designed a force structure that was appropriate for the conditions in which it was most likely to fight.

After the war, British influence re-established itself. As Kuring points out, it was not until the late 1950s that Australian infantry training pamphlets were introduced. In Korea, where the Australian battalions fought as part of the Commonwealth Brigade, the readjustment made sense. The establishment of the battalion at this time was approximately 970 men. It is also likely that the prospect of having to contribute to alliance operations in the Middle East shaped the readoption of a manpower-heavy establishment. Nonetheless, the postwar battalion structure was the most sophisticated command structure yet devised, demonstrating the increased complexity of warfare in an age where the battalion was more vulnerable on the battlefield than ever. Without going into detail, battalions in the 1950s possessed four rifle companies, a headquarters or administrative company and a support company. The two additional companies were responsible for the complement of specialist platoons that had first made their appearance during World War II. These comparatively large establishments were made possible as the 'in principle' basis for mass mobilisation by the introduction of compulsory military service in 1951.

The deployment of 2 RAR, 3 RAR and 1 RAR to the Malayan emergency from October 1955 also served to confirm the influence of British Army tactics, weapons and techniques. It is notable, however, that, as a result of manpower shortages, both 1 RAR and 3 RAR were only able to deploy with three rifle companies. Given the counterinsurgency context, the lack of an extra manoeuvre unit was not necessarily the disadvantage that it would have been on higher-intensity operations. It did, however, establish a precedent that the Army has since fallen back on in times of manpower shortages. Limiting the number of manoeuvre elements to keep sub-units at something approximating a notional full-strength establishment might be an acceptable peacetime expedient. However, on combat operations the limitation imposed on the battalion's ability to manoeuvre is crippling.

Perhaps the most extraordinary version of the battalion ever devised by the Australian Army was that created during the abortive Pentropic experiment between 1960 and 1964. The Pentropic experiment was intended to provide 'a lean, powerful, versatile organisation, readily adaptable to any type of operation in which it is likely to be involved in South-East Asia'.¹² Introduced in March 1960, the reorganisation was designed to be compatible with the 'Pentomic' organisation that had been adopted by the United States Army in the late 1950s.¹³ In this organisation the

¹² 'The Pentropic Division', *Australian Army Journal*, no. 129, February 1960, p. 7.

¹³ A particularly good discussion is to be found in J. C. Blaxland, *Organising an Army: The Australian Experience 1957–1965*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 50, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1989, chaps 3–4; also David Horner, 'From Korea to Pentropic: The Australian Army in the 1950s and early 1960s, in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Second Fifty Years: The Australian Army 1947–1997*,

battalion supplanted the brigade. The Pentropic division comprised five infantry battalions, each with a strength of 1304 men—almost twice the tropical battalion's establishment. Each battalion consisted of five rifle companies, which contained four rifle platoons. Even each rifle platoon consisted of four sections.

The Achilles heel of the Pentropic battalion was its poor mobility. As the battalion was supposed to be strategically air-mobile, it was operationally and tactically dependent on foot mobility and had to rely on divisional resources to move by road. Although on paper the Pentropic division possessed an armoured personnel carrier regiment capable of lifting a battalion, these vehicles did not come into service until 1964. It should be noted that these vehicles still provide our mobile mechanised infantry protection thirty-nine years later.

The Australian Army soon found that the Pentropic organisation was unwieldy and inflexible at the tactical level. Given that the nature of the battalion, however configured, is that it should be the basic building block of flexible land operations, the experiment was happily abandoned in favour of the tropical warfare battalion model that went to Vietnam. This model reverted to the four-rifle company, support company and administrative company model that we have today. Notably the size of the battalion dropped to 790 men, never to climb back up to the 1000-man level that had previously characterised the standard concept of the battalion.

pp. 62–70; D. S. McCarthy, 'The Once and Future Army: An Organizational, Political and Social History of the Citizen Military Forces, 1947–1974', PhD thesis (School of History, ADFA), University of New South Wales, Canberra, 1997, Part II; Jeffrey Grey, *The Australian Army*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 203–9.

After Vietnam, with the introduction in 1976 of the Infantry Division model designed for the territorial defence of continental Australia, the battalion structure underwent change again. The basic structure remained, but the battalion received more vehicles, resulting in some greater mobility; it acquired a reconnaissance and surveillance platoon and an air defence/machine-gun platoon. The anti-armour platoon received vehicle-mounted heavy weapons to replace its medium antitank weapons. All of these changes amounted to more flexibility and tactical options for the battalion commander. However, the reality during the late 1970s and the 1980s was that even the regular battalions were hollow organisations. What is more, the implementation of these changes took years to seep down into the reserve units.

The demands of maintaining preparedness for broad-spectrum operational tasks across the Australian theatre of operations led to the introduction in 1979 of three specialist taskforces within the 1st Division. Consequently, the regular infantry component was broken down into parachute and mechanised battalions, two light-infantry battalions and two 'standard' infantry battalions. These specialist roles have persisted ever since and create our current confusion as to what a 'standard' battalion actually is. Ian Kuring's observation on the trend to specialisation is telling:

The Army's decision to establish specialist infantry battalions and specialist capabilities across almost the full spectrum of conflict, on the basis of their constituting a core force to provide an expansion base in the event of mobilisation, was good in theory. However, for the scheme to be successful, the specialist battalions would require the necessary manpower, equipment and resources available to equip and train the units that would have to be raised for mobilisation and operational rotation. The problem was that the Army barely had the

equipment and resources available to provide for the existing units, and there was little prospect that additional equipment would be purchased . . .¹⁴

In short, the model could not be sustained once the tempo of operations lifted beyond chasing ‘thugs in thongs’ around the northern end of Australia. Nor was it flexible enough to provide substantial forces to participate in higher-intensity coalition operations. By default, the Australian infantry battalion became a ‘niche capability’ suitable for deployment in too limited a range of circumstances.

Furthermore, the decision to maintain light ‘peacetime establishments’ produced a self-deluding concept of the capability represented by our infantry battalions. For most of the period from the end of the Vietnam War to 1999, infantry battalions were substantially hollow and resorted to various stratagems in order to disguise their lack of combat readiness. The standard battalion had a wartime establishment of 753, but a peacetime establishment of 547 men. The fourth rifle company became a phantom and the specialist platoons ran significantly under strength. While these expedients might have suited an army that was not expected to go anywhere or do anything, the end result was that, for a generation, no Australian infantry battalion maintained the capacity to conduct anything but low-level operations. As the Chief of the General Staff from 1977 to 1982, Lieutenant General Donald Dunstan concluded:

Expertise in specialised areas was being lost, or was at best static. We expected too many people to be jack-of-all-trades . . . The worst part, however, was the level of operational readiness we could achieve. There was so much regrouping of men and equipment which had to be done. The result was that I could not guarantee to

¹⁴ Kuring, *Redcoats to Cams*, draft manuscript, p. 345.

provide a task force of two battalions in less than about three months, or a battalion group in less than a month.¹⁵

This peacetime mentality imposed limitations on the utility of Australia's infantry for the broad-spectrum operations that have become all too common since the end of the Cold War. The problems associated with maintaining under-strength units became particularly apparent with the emergency deployment of 1RAR to Somalia in January 1993. Personnel and equipment had to be stripped out of other units to make this operation possible. It was a foretaste of things to come.

The upgrading of the 1st Brigade during the first half of 1999 in anticipation of operations in East Timor once again placed pressure on the Army's ability to do anything other than conduct operations. An army is a living organism; it must not only be able to conduct its primary mission on operations, but it must have the ability to regenerate itself in equipment and personnel, and train for future missions. Without the extra capacity to do so, it will rapidly exhaust itself and become useless. The operational tempo that has been maintained since 1999 in East Timor has seen all the regular battalions cycled through that country. The additional burden of operations in Iraq and the Solomon Islands has caused the infantry labour pool to become strained to breaking point.

Despite this much-needed experience, Australian infantry battalions have not been the Government's unit of choice for deployment to higher-intensity operations. It is a harsh reality that, in order to deploy an Australian infantry-based force on anything exceeding a medium-level coalition operation in our

¹⁵ Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Donald Dunstan, Address to Army Staff College, Queenscliff, Vic., 1980.

current strategic environment, we would face significant issues of interoperability that would relegate our forces to second-tier tasks. In information-age warfare, the battalion, as it stands, still represents an industrial-age capability.

The utility of infantry across the spectrum of conflict

If we were to examine the history of most infantry battalions during the 20th century, we would inevitably focus on the part that they played in war. The same can be said for most armies. However, the same could not be said for the 19th century, nor is it likely to prove true in the 21st century. The sort of all-consuming, globally distributed, interstate, industrial-age warfare that occurred last century is an anomaly. Nonetheless, as we know only too well, conflict is now even more prevalent than it was in the ideology-based great-power conflicts of the past. The threats posed by failing and rogue states, fundamentalist faith systems, and environmental and demographic tensions mean that there is a greater need than ever for land forces that possess the ability to control terrain and populations. As General Shinseki has observed:

People live on the ground; they have their problems on the ground; they attempt to regulate their affairs through government on the ground. If required, the Army can scale its capabilities precisely to compel better behavior on the part of antagonists or, if necessary, to close with and destroy adversaries with decisive force.¹⁶

His message is simple—only land forces can maintain the presence necessary to enforce peace or eradicate opposition.

¹⁶ General Shinseki, State of the Army Address to the Association of the United States Army, 21 October 2002, Washington DC, viewed 17 June 2003, <<http://www.ausa.org/am/shinseki2.html>>.

In the final analysis, this task cannot be done remotely, or from a vehicle. The buck stops with the man with a rifle whose mere presence is the ultimate token of his government's commitment to a cause. The role played by the foot soldier is as important in peace enforcement as it is in warfighting. Dr Paul Harris of the Department of War Studies at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, asserted that:

[I]ntoxicated by technology or blinded by science, it is all too easy to lose touch with reality. After a couple of centuries of extremely rapid technological change the world's most sophisticated and adaptable instrument of war (and, perhaps even more importantly, of military operations short of war) is still the infantryman.¹⁷

What we need to come to terms with is that, while the infantryman remains the ultimate determinant in conflict, the manner in which he will go about his work has changed. As in most other professions and trades that have been transformed by technology, most notably information technology, we need to reassess what it is that the infantry actually does.

The infantry battalion of the 20th century was an organisation designed to fight conventional operations in the context of Total War. It could step down to counterinsurgency operations, but it remained a highly centralised organisation. This relative inflexibility did not prove to be an obstacle to operations in South-East Asia. Australian battalions were given clear tasks that usually involved controlling a given area of operations. With an operational rather than a strategic focus, battalions did their job, but in an essentially attritional manner. Compare the role played by Australian infantry battalions in Phuoc Tuy

¹⁷ Paul Harris, 'Radicalism in Military Thought', in Bond and Melvin (eds), *The Nature of Future Conflict*, p. 42.

province between 1965 and 1972 with the role played by the units that broke into Baghdad in April 2003. Granted, it was a different type of war, but we now inhabit a different world. It is inconceivable that today Australian units would be committed to a conflict with no clear objectives and only the certainty of ongoing casualties. In that sense, the decision to deploy an infantry unit is no longer merely made at the operational level; it is a national strategic issue.

The current infantry battalion is consequently not just a minor pawn in the gargantuan clashes of industrial-age warfare. We need to consider what roles the infantry battalion plays in our contemporary strategic environment. Infantry has utility in all the operations to which the Army will be called on to contribute. However, we must ask whether adhering to a notional and formalised standard infantry battalion structure will make our infantry the units of choice as the basis for any operational force. What is it that our infantry battalions do? The reality of course has been spelt out in the widely accepted concept of the ‘three-block war’. This concept emerged in United States Marine Corps doctrine, which states that:

Humanitarian assistance operations, peace operations, and full-scale, high-intensity combat may occur simultaneously in different neighborhoods. Integrating and coordinating these various evolutions, each of which has its own peculiarities, will challenge Marines to use their skill and determination in innovative and imaginative ways.¹⁸

¹⁸ United States Marine Corps, *Warfighting Concepts for the 21st Century*, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 1996, p. VII-5.

These are the roles and the challenges for which the infantry battalion must be prepared, but when we turn to our doctrine, what do we find?

The role of the infantry battalion is to seek out and close with the enemy, to kill or capture him, to seize and hold ground and repel attack, by day or night, regardless of season, weather or terrain.¹⁹

That is not the role of the infantry battalion—the description spells out but a few of the battalion’s roles, and those roles are purely tactical in nature. It might be correct to retain this definition as the explicitly tactical function of the battalion in combat, but it is also necessary to consider the operational and even strategic functions performed by an infantry unit in peace enforcement as well as in war. By persisting with this formula, we are telling the world what our infantry are not ready to do—whether the misdescription is accurate or not. The old rubric describes the battalion as a blunt instrument of industrial-age war, not the flexible, discriminate and precise tool that we want it to be.

Some might consider it heresy to challenge the time-honoured formula that the Australian infantry has made its own. Most Australian infantrymen are surprised to find that, far from being a historical article of faith, the current description of the role of the infantry was only introduced in the provisional doctrine for the Pentropic division in 1963.²⁰ Prior to that date, the doctrinal guidance, which was derived from British publications, tended to emphasise the essential flexibility of the battalion across the spectrum of conflict. It is notable that none of our allies defines the role of the

¹⁹ Australian Army, *The Infantry Battalion, Manual of Land Warfare*, Part Two, Volume 1, 1984, para. 101.

²⁰ Australian Army, *The Pentropic Division in Battle (Provisional)*, Pamphlet no. 8, Infantry, 1963, p. 1.

battalion in such prescriptive terms. The British infantry doctrine that was released in the same year as the Pentropic publication was both more direct and more accurate. It defined the *task* of the infantry as ‘to close with the enemy and destroy him’.²¹ However, when describing the *role* of the infantry battalion, it pointed out that:

The brunt of all operations which the British Army may be called on to undertake will inevitably be borne by the Infantry. These operations may range from Internal Security commitments to full-scale war fought in any latitude, terrain or climate . . . It is therefore essential that the Infantry soldier, his arms and equipment, and the organization of the battalion are readily adaptable to meet all of these contingencies.²²

The role of the infantry, operating as a unit, is clearly more open-ended than the fundamental task of the infantryman in action. It is an important distinction that the Australian Army should take to heart. The traditional description of the infantry battalion’s role is deeply rooted in limited notions of how conventional interstate warfare would be fought. The effect of persisting with a restricting definition is to circumscribe the role of modern infantry. Certainly, the definition has the virtue of being neat, memorable and appropriately bellicose, but is it accurate?

Infantrymen point out that seizing and holding ground is an integral part of peace operations, but that observation is drawing an analogy rather than describing how operations are conducted in reality. Nowadays, infantry may be flown into a theatre of operations on commercial flights, deployed to their operating base in civilian buses, and spend most of

²¹ British Army, *The Infantry Battalion in Battle, Infantry Training*, vol. IV—Tactics, 1963, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

their tour in soft hats and shirt-sleeve order simply providing security by their very presence. To be able to do this effectively, they need to be credible combat soldiers—an iron fist in a velvet glove and so, whether they have to fight or not, their professional ability to do so must never be in doubt.

The contemporary reality is that the role of the infantry battalion is to be able to fight within the full spectrum of military operations. The ability of the infantry battalion to orchestrate combat power on land provides it with the capacity to simultaneously conduct or support the full range of military security tasks. The deployment of an infantry battalion nowadays is the most potent proof of a government's commitment to a cause, whether that involves warfighting or stability operations. Today, an Australian infantry battalion's role on operations might be strategic, rather than purely tactical. Consequently, we might want to revisit our conception of the infantry battalion's role in contemporary operations.

An infantry battalion would rarely be deployed on operations as an autonomous unit. That concept belongs to the era when a 1000-man battalion consisted of riflemen and nothing else. Now, when a battalion is deployed, the headquarters of the battalion is likely to become the command element of a battalion group and it will be provided with engineers, military police, aviation—even armour and artillery—to enable it to perform the task required of it. The multi-dimensional tasking of an infantry-based battalion group involves preparing for contingencies that far exceed the inherited shibboleth of the Pentropic era. Consequently, a better description of the collective task of an infantry unit would be to say that *the role of the infantry battalion group is to orchestrate combat power on land by*

both close combat and deep battle, across the full spectrum of operations, in all environments.

It is a given that infantry has to possess the ability to close with and destroy an enemy in any environment. Infantry is also capable of much more. Throughout history, infantry units have been used in constabulary roles, in border control, in providing governance and humanitarian relief, as a deterrent and as a guarantee of stability. Those roles are not going to disappear, though it is amusing to see them described as ‘new military tasks’ in the most recent Defence White Paper.²³ In fact, each of these roles was familiar to Caesar’s legions. There is more continuity than change in these often-overlooked functions of the infantry battalion. However, the White Paper does make a very good point when it states that:

Even in benign situations, an evident capability to use force can help to keep things peaceful. When trouble starts, the ability to respond promptly with a clear predominance of force will often restore peace quickly, which is important not just for achieving the mission, but also for protecting our servicemen and servicewomen . . . This means that the capabilities we need for these types of operations will have a lot in common with those we develop for more conventional conflicts.²⁴

Infantry battalion groups are the most common capability that countries contribute to coalition operations of every type. This is because the battalion group meets the criteria that ‘Jo’ Gullett identified. It is self-contained and largely self-supporting. It is a force package that is readily

²³ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000, Our Future Defence Force*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2000, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

transportable and it can defend itself while having extra capacity to conduct other operations.

It is a bonus if the battalion group has its own integral transport. We must therefore ask ourselves why we continue to define the role of the infantry by such a limited perception of its role. We should also question whether this restrictive definition serves to limit our appreciation of what the infantry will become. The key issue that needs to be addressed is whether the infantry battalion will continue to evolve or whether our attachment to an anachronistic concept of operations will marginalise the relevance of infantry. In order to answer this question we need to consider the unique contribution that any unit of foot soldiers makes to combat on land.

The infantry unit and its relationship to ground

What distinguishes the infantry from the other arms and services is its intimate relationship to the terrain on which it fights. In *This Kind of War*, his classic work on the Korean War, T. R. Fehrenbach pointed out the gritty reality of land combat:

[Y]ou may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud.²⁵

Not only was Fehrenbach an historian, but he was a combat veteran of both World War II and Korea. His own experience as well as his scholarship led him to conclude that, as long as

²⁵ T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness*, Pocket Books, New York, 1964, p. 454.

men resorted to violence in order to compete, there would always be a requirement for professional infantry.

The infantry are, by definition, those who fight on foot; historically this has implied close combat. However, the notion of what constitutes close combat has become extremely elastic. What has changed is the relationship of the infantryman to the ground on which he fights. That relationship is shaped by the control that infantry can exert over their environment by their use of weapons as well as by their vulnerability to weapons that are used against them. The increased range and weight of firepower available to the infantry has led to an extraordinary decentralisation of tactical formations over the past century or so. This process is ongoing and continues to shape the sort of organisation that the fundamental infantry tactical unit must be. A simple example of the dispersion of the battalion on the battlefield is the growth of the battalion frontage.

One hundred and forty years ago, in one of the most decisive infantry clashes of all time—the battle of Gettysburg—the outcome of the battle hinged on whether the Confederate Army could turn the Union Army's left flank. At the critical point where Joshua Chamberlain's 20th Maine stopped the Confederate assault on Little Round Top, his entire regimental frontage was less than 300 yards. It was a position that would nowadays be held by a platoon. A half century after Gettysburg, the Western Front stretched from the North Sea to Switzerland, but a single battalion frontage amounted to approximately 800 metres.²⁶ In contemporary operations, a battalion may not occupy static positions but move rapidly around the area of operations by air or armoured vehicle. Successive Australian battalion groups

²⁶ John A. English, *On Infantry*, 1st edn, Praeger, New York, 1981, p. 8.

have occupied just such an operational environment in Sector West in East Timor.

The effect of battlefield dispersion has been that the exercise of authority has been pushed down to ever more junior commanders. Where Colonel Chamberlain could command his unit at Gettysburg using his own voice, by 1914 the infantry company rather than the battalion was generally recognised as the basic tactical unit—and even then a company commander might have to resort to runners or field telephones to communicate with his platoons. It was ‘the smallest element of a body of troops capable of sustaining an action independently, or performing a simple combat task.’²⁷ In Western armies, the introduction of portable radio communications did not lead to more centralisation. Instead, it empowered junior leaders by giving them direct access to fire support and the ability to call on the resources of the battalion.

The devolution of tactical authority to smaller units meant that those units required a greater range of tactical options. This imperative required that units at ever more junior levels possess a range of different weapons. For example, the appearance of light machine-guns in the battalion during World War I originally saw these weapons employed in specialist sections within the platoon, but during World War II each standard rifle section possessed a light machine-gun. A similar process has occurred with hand grenades, rifle grenades and light anti-armour weapons. The distribution of different weapons within the smallest unit in the army was inappropriate in the era of linear tactics, yet it became

²⁷ See Colonel R. Home, *A Précis of Modern Tactics*, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1882, pp. 4–7; W. Balck, *Tactics, Vol. 1: Introduction and formal tactics of infantry*, 4th edn, Hugh Rees, London, 1914, p. 32; English, *On Infantry*, p. 8.

essential for close combat on the dispersed battlefield. Writing after World War I, Basil Liddell Hart pointed out the revolutionary change that had occurred in the role of the infantry:

The infantry unit is no longer a fixed segment of the battle machine, but becomes an independent moving part—a miniature replica of the whole, fighting its own small battle.²⁸

The devolution of authority and the dispersion of the foot soldier throughout the battlespace has proceeded unabated since that time. For commanders this process is an uncomfortable phenomenon as they are faced with the prospect of losing control over their troops. Yet it is also an opportunity to be grasped. In training for, and participating in, jungle warfare in World War II and since, the Australian infantry has made significant advances in giving platoon commanders control of their part of the battle. Most recently we have seen the emergence of the ‘strategic corporal’ in the mean streets of contemporary urban conflict, on dispersed operations against warrior bands and fedayeen, and on complex peace operations. More than ever before, fuelled by the omnipresent media, the actions of a single soldier can have a global effect.

In two recent articles published in the United States *Marine Corps Gazette*, two officers have pointed out that the Marine infantry are losing whole aspects of their role to Special Forces units.²⁹ When they do fight and achieve the greatest

²⁸ B. H. Liddell Hart, *A Science of Infantry Tactics Simplified*, 3rd edn, William Clows and Sons, London, 1926, p. 25.

²⁹ Major Lloyd D. Freeman, ‘Winning Future Battles: Why the Infantry Must Change’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 2003, pp. 54–8; Captain Owen O. West, ‘Who Will Be the First to Fight?’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, May 2003, pp. 54–6.

effect, it is on those occasions that the infantry operates more like Special Forces troops did in past conflicts. In contemporary combat, land forces—‘special’ or conventional—can maximise their lethal effect by not simply relying on their own firepower but by orchestrating the tremendous capability of precision firepower to shape the battlespace that they alone physically occupy. Yet Special Forces can only provide a fleeting presence, but a battalion force—even one dispersed over greater distances than ever before—can utilise surveillance systems and precision firepower to dominate large areas of operations. In his article ‘Winning Future Battles: Why the Infantry Must Change’, Major Lloyd Freeman concluded that in Afghanistan: ‘The marriage of technological dominance and sound tactics allowed a few to do the job of what historically could only be executed by a much larger force’.³⁰ He cites F. J. West, the former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in the Reagan administration, to suggest that we should at least consider the ‘operational option of smaller units fighting a war in which ground maneuver supports standoff firepower, rather than firepower supporting maneuver’.³¹

This approach holds the promise of reduced casualties since infantry need not necessarily always rely on firepower to shield their movements. Rather, infantry might prefer to use their capabilities in order to remain out of the range of the enemy’s weapons while progressively dismantling their ability to fight. Of course this is only a concept that will never fully survive contact with the messy reality of actual combat operations. Should an enemy continue to resist, whether by conventional or unconventional means, the infantry must carry their weapons forward in order to subdue

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

them. Nonetheless, the option of remaining disengaged from the enemy while orchestrating stand-off firepower is a manoeuvrist approach that is available to the contemporary infantry commander. As operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, if we are to defeat elusive enemies in battle, it is not just a matter of massing firepower and troops. Information-age forces are best utilised when they dominate the battlespace with rapid manoeuvre, never allowing the enemy to gain the initiative.

For contemporary combat forces, this imperative means that we need to question all of our current assumptions about how we conduct ground combat. Recently, an Australian infantry officer, Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen, wrote an article in the *Australian Army Journal*, in which he made a convincing case for rethinking the basis of infantry close combat. He concluded that:

we should consider the relationship between firepower and movement, the need to achieve ‘fire dominance’ before attempting to manoeuvre, the use of a ‘reserve of fire’ rather than solely a manoeuvre reserve, and the notion that suppression rather than manoeuvre leads to victory in close combat.³²

The experience of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated the huge potential of adopting an approach to land operations that takes full advantage of the lethal effect of combined and joint weapons systems as well as the close-combat capabilities of the infantry. In the past, conventional land operations involved the deployment of large numbers of troops to do the actual fighting. Current operations have adopted a very different approach. Fewer troops are

³² Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen, ‘Rethinking the Basis of Infantry Close Combat’, *Australian Army Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 2003, pp. 29–40 at 38.

deployed on the ground, and those that are so deployed are highly mobile and better protected than ever before. As the conventional Iraqi forces found during the recent war, massed forces just make for better targets. Small units can direct precision missiles and air support to great effect, and can do so without becoming involved in the fight themselves. By delaying the evil hour when close combat becomes a necessity, the risk of suffering casualties among our own forces is much reduced.

Warfighting operations against conventional industrial-age forces should no longer take the form of the traditional advance to contact. In these circumstances, without detailed knowledge of enemy dispositions, the forward elements are forced to probe, sometimes blindly, for the enemy. Instead, the superior situational awareness of information-age forces allows them to mount deep attacks using rapid mobility in order to position themselves for maximum effect in anticipation of contact.³³ However, as coalition forces found in Iraq, in order to defeat the enemy they will have to be engaged in close battle at some stage. Everything that precedes that moment is preparatory to the point of decision. At that stage, given the limitations set by safety distances for aerial fire support, the organic direct- and indirect-fire resources of combat troops are required to destroy resistance.

When Colonel Ardant Du Picq wrote his classic work *Battle Studies* in the late 1860s, he argued that:

In modern battle, which is delivered with combatants so far apart, man has come to have a horror of man. He

³³ See Michael Evans, 'From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War', *Naval War College Review*, Summer 2003, vol. LVI, no. 3, pp. 132–50 at 144–5.

comes to hand to hand fighting only to defend his body or if forced to it by some fortuitous encounter.³⁴

Du Picq's fundamental contention was that the urge to fight from a distance was instinctive in man and had always shaped the way in which we have sought to wage war. It is now generally accepted that man has an instinctive aversion to killing his fellow man in close-quarter combat, though the same reluctance does not necessarily apply to those that kill at a distance. This theme has been thoroughly explored by Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman in his well-regarded psychological study *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*; his work does not require further elaboration in this paper.³⁵ In short, as the British military historian Paddy Griffith has pointed out, close combat:

is not generally desired by either party, since it represents a removal of psychological restrictions upon aggressive behaviour. It comes closer to the essence of total war than can any amount of fighting at long range.³⁶

The ability to conduct close combat effectively and with discrimination is perhaps the most terrifying and impressive characteristic of Australian infantry—terrifying to an enemy, that is. In the two World Wars, opponents shrank from the

³⁴ Colonel Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*, trans. Colonel John N. Greely and Major Robert C. Cotton, The Military Service Publishing Company, Harrisburg, PA, 1947, p. 126.

³⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1996, see pp. 107–10.

³⁶ Paddy Griffith, *Forward Into Battle: Fighting Tactics from Waterloo to the Near Future*, Crowood Press, Swindon, Wilts, 1990, p. 179.

close-quarter clash with those ferocious, tall, bronzed men with their long bayonets and blood in their eye. Close combat might no longer involve the bayonet charge, but the ability of Australian infantry to get ‘up close and personal’ provides them with both a psychological and a practical ascendancy over most likely enemies. Writing of his own infantry, American Colonel Daniel Bolger has warned that:

Regardless of all the endless hype about smart bombs and a deluge of fire, somehow, someday, it will always come down to the raw and primal, as it always does. On that day of reckoning, a few men must get up and go forward, a thin green line of soldiers and Marines advancing through death ground . . . ³⁷

On land no-one can perform this task as well as infantry and few, if any, armies have as strong a tradition, or are as effective practitioners, of close combat than Australian fighting men.

It has become obvious that on recent operations Special Forces small units have supplanted the infantry in orchestrating effects in ground combat. They have done so brilliantly, even though what they were doing was conducting 21st-century light-infantry operations, rather than their own primary task of strategic strike and reconnaissance. However, as Colonel Bolger has pointed out, special operations forces depend on stealth, surprise and speed.³⁸ If caught by inferior troops with superior numbers, they can be defeated and they can fail in their missions. There will never be enough special operations troops to accomplish all missions, and it is wasteful in training, personnel and resources to try to create a class of super

³⁷ Daniel P. Bolger, *Death Ground: Today's American Infantry in Battle*, Presidio, Novato, CA, 2000, p. 327.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

warriors for even the simplest task. Rather, in order to be effective, modern infantry needs to take on many of the capabilities and techniques that were formerly the province of special forces.

If the Australian infantry of the future are to be able to win back their primary role of conducting close combat, they need the ability to access precision fire support at the lowest levels as well as the training to do so. Most importantly they require dedicated protected battlefield mobility to ensure that they can dominate ground and are not just tethered goats.

Mobility and the infantry battalion

Seventy years ago Basil Liddell Hart published a slim volume of his lectures titled ‘The Future of Infantry’. It was classic Liddell Hart—a mixture of insightful, forward-thinking observations and dogmatic personal prejudice. His key theme was essentially the same one elaborated in this paper. The effectiveness of infantry at any given time in history is a product of the degree of tactical mobility that they can bring to a fight. This is not rocket science; Civil War General Nathan Bedford Forrest recognised the key to military success when he said that it was ‘to get there fustest with the mostest’. Numbers, shock effect, even firepower run a poor second to the ability of the infantry to dominate the battlespace by their seeming ubiquity—which is to say by their physical presence at key points at key times.

However, Liddell Hart’s observations were novel for their time—he was, after all, talking to officers who had experienced mass deadlock on the Western Front which had resolved itself largely through an unbelievably costly process of attrition. This was a generation that eagerly sought to innovate, but the reality was that they lacked the

technology and the human resources to do so. A decade later, these same officers had to fight the next war with a mass army of citizen soldiers. For the most part they adopted very formal, essentially linear set-piece infantry tactics—their forces were not yet ready for the complexities of manoeuvre warfare. Speaking to these officers, Liddell Hart focused on warfighting, but his principles apply equally well to the full spectrum of land operations.

Liddell Hart's key points may be summarised briefly. First, he argued that to 'make any deductions as to the future of infantry we must try to gauge the future trend of scientific progress and its effect on civil conditions. For the nature of armies is determined by the nature of the civilization in which they exist.'³⁹ He suggested that armies traditionally resisted change, but that, when it comes to fighting, the contemporary social and technological environment shapes the form of conflict. Furthermore, he suggested that, in order to 'forecast the future trend of infantry [accurately,] we need to know its past' for 'both the qualities and the limitations of infantry have their roots in the past'.⁴⁰ He was correct; too many of us believe that what we think of as a battalion is immutable and set in stone. In fact there have been a wide variety of organisations that have gone by the name.

Liddell Hart pointed out that throughout history the common foot-soldier was employed in an undifferentiated mass and that this had reached its supreme expression in the conscript armies of the modern era:

But at intervals a class of picked foot-soldiers has sprung out of the mere armed mass, and by his

³⁹ Liddell Hart, *The Future of Infantry*, Faber & Faber, London, 1933, p. 7. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 10.

peculiar attributes has then played a vital, often decisive part in war. That class represents the real infantry tradition and embodies the real history of the arm, as well as the spirit that we should seek to revive.⁴¹

It is worth noting the concept of the *peculiar* attributes of infantry. These attributes have manifested themselves in the Greek phalanx, the Roman legion, the English archer, the German storm-troops and their *Fallschirmjäger*, and the Japanese troops who passed through our lines in Malaya with seeming impunity. Arguably, the mechanised and air-mobile infantry of both recent Gulf Wars and Afghanistan possess a qualitative advantage over any other force likely to be deployed against them. There is high-quality infantry and there is useless cannon-fodder, but once again Liddell Hart was right when he suggested that only those infantry that develop a marked competitive advantage are worthy of our attention as models for change. We must therefore ask ourselves: What is our current peculiar competitive advantage?

Contemplating the fate of infantry in the war that he had just fought, Liddell Hart explored the cause of trench-bound stalemate. His conclusions are of some significance for us as we struggle to adopt a manoeuvrist mindset:

The use of masses paralysed the ability of units and individuals to manoeuvre on the battlefield. The tendency towards mass was fostered by the development of railways. These certainly gave infantry a new strategic mobility, under limitations, but weight of numbers and the weight of equipment worn by the man crippled the tactical mobility of the infantry . . .

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

Infantry thus became more helpless as weapons were becoming more powerful.⁴²

This lack of mobility is the critical vulnerability of the infantry. An infantryman himself, Liddell Hart was under no illusions. In modern war infantry would never, by itself, prove to be the decisive arm: '*because they cannot strike quick enough or follow through soon enough for decisiveness in battle*'.⁴³ To his mind, the infantry was really a facilitator that was the 'means of preparing and making possible a decision'. Infantry had a *fixing* role, which could be either passive in holding ground and providing mobile forces a firm base, or active and able to be defined as the power to 'disorganise' the enemy. This power was only made possible by infantry that possessed real tactical mobility and could be achieved by wielding demoralisingly effective fire, by penetrating the enemy's defences and by menacing his rear.⁴⁴

The need for tactical mobility brings me to consider the rapid progress that has been made possible in recent history and the impact that this progress has had on the tactical placement of infantry. The opposing forces at Gettysburg found their way onto the battlefield by foot. A half century after the United States' Civil War, great armies descended on the Western Front from all over the world, borne by ships and rail. A half century after that, Americans were training for heliborne operations that were to see battalions deployed at speed around large areas of operations in South-East Asia. Yet, the description of the mobility characteristics of the infantry battalion in the Army's extant doctrine are that:

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 34. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.

The battalion is designed to move on foot carrying sufficient support weapons for operations. The headquarters, support company platoons and administrative elements have limited cross-country mobility in organic wheeled vehicles. All vehicles are air portable in medium range transport aircraft, and the battalion can be moved in organic divisional wheeled vehicles. The fighting elements of the battalion can be mounted in a squadron of armoured personnel carrier [sic.] (APC).⁴⁵

The current doctrine was promulgated in 1984 and new doctrine is in preparation; it is therefore likely that we will see a much more advanced concept of infantry mobility emerge. As the doctrine stands, there is no mention of air mobility, the reference to APCs denotes that they are for transport rather than an integrated tactical support vehicle and it assumes that it is necessary to carry sufficient support weapons for operations. It is not a prescription that is consistent with the Army's emerging philosophy of a 'hardened' force. In an age where extraordinary fire support can be made available on demand, why would the Battalion seek to be self-sufficient in fire support—particularly when the weapons that it can carry are extremely limited in the precision and effectiveness of the firepower that they can deliver?

Liddell Hart's point about armies assuming the nature of the civilisation in which they exist is one that we should not forget. In the ordinary course of our daily lives, we utilise many and varied forms of mobility. The concept of operations for the infantry battalion should not be constrained by transport options that belong to an earlier time. The old infantryman's adage 'never walk when you can ride' is taken for granted in our civilisations, and so it

⁴⁵ Australian Army, *The Infantry Battalion, Manual of Land Warfare*, Part Two, vol. 1, 1984, para. 104.

should be when we consider the mobility options that are open to the infantry. As the Australian Army proceeds with its task of providing protected mobility to its troops, force planners need to bear in mind that the task of ‘hardening’ the infantry and protecting them from the horrors of attritional warfare is not new. What is novel is the fact that today we possess the capabilities that allow infantry to close with the enemy without sustaining unnecessary losses.

Seventy years ago Liddell Hart conceived of mobile battalions of light mechanised forces advancing in an ‘expanding torrent’. Unfortunately, the technology that would have realised his vision was in its infancy and inadequate to the task. As we now know, even the German Army that was to apply the principles of blitzkrieg only seven years after the publication of Liddell Hart’s book relied on foot-mobile infantry and horse-drawn logistics. Whether infantry are mounted or dismounted, Liddell Hart left us with a vision of movement that should continue to influence our thinking:

The close ranked continuous line is replaced by the elastic chain of little groups, independent yet interdependent, each working forward steadfastly and stealthily, screening its movements by using every scrap of cover that the ground offers, or fire provides, ever ready to help its neighbour, and all the time probing for weak spots in the enemy’s defence.⁴⁶

Finally, we should not forget that the mobility of the individual infantryman translates into the ability of the battalion group to achieve its mission.

In his classic work, *The Soldier’s Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, S. L. A. Marshall made the case that operational

⁴⁶ Liddell Hart, *The Future of Infantry*, p. 62.

success was contingent on the freshness and the energy of troops committed to battle. By lightening the physical burden on soldiers, he argued, ‘5000 relatively fresh fighting men will defeat 15 000 worn-out men in the opposing line any day in the week’.⁴⁷ Rather than burden our foot soldiers down with equipment, every opportunity should be taken to transport their gear for them and ensure that, as they move towards combat, they themselves do not have to walk one step more than they have to.

In an unpublished paper that was written in 2002, Warrant Officer Ian Kuring pointed out that the standard load of the contemporary Australian infantryman had grown to a degree where it was greater now than it had been at any time since the Napoleonic Wars.⁴⁸ An infantryman equipped in marching order for service in the field will still carry more than 45 kilograms—an amount in excess of half of his body weight. In an age in which labour-saving devices abound, the infantryman is still a beast of burden—a state of affairs that is inefficient and derogates from his effectiveness. This observation does not detract from the need for modern infantry to maintain extraordinarily high levels of fitness.

The task of conducting close combat will make the greatest demand on their energy and resilience. Like any athlete, they need to be delivered to the point of competition in the peak of condition. Again, whether they fight from vehicles or on foot, our infantrymen should enjoy every advantage of protection, mobility and relief from discomfort that we can bestow on them. Not to do so is to deny them the operational advantage in those tasks that we ask of them. It is a matter of pride for

⁴⁷ Colonel S. L. A. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation*, Marine Corps Association, Quantico, VA, 1980, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Ian Kuring, ‘The Infantryman's Load’, Australian Army History Unit, 7 April 2002. (Unpublished)

the ‘poor bloody infantry’ that they will endure whatever is thrown at them and sometimes it is necessary to make a virtue of necessity. However, we should not simply assume that, because infantry are capable of fighting and dying hard, then things should be done that way. The infantry of the future are going to be faced with a raft of novel challenges; we must continue to look for technologies, structures, tools and techniques to meet those challenges so that infantrymen can do their job better and with minimal losses.

Conclusion

Whether the changes that are occurring have implications that are organisational, tactical or technological in nature, one thing is certain: our infantry must continue to evolve or they will inevitably meet with defeat. It is not a prospect about which any member of the Australian community can afford to be complacent, for our infantry are family members and friends, they are present and future contributors to our national life. The infantryman’s contract with the state is one of unlimited liability, and if we do not question orthodoxy and embrace innovation, the cost will be in lives. In his recent article in the *Australian Army Journal*, Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen set out the problem that faces contemporary force-planners and commanders when he observed that: ‘The Infantry corps is, at times, the most conventional and traditional of corps. Yet . . . such orthodoxy is highly dangerous, particularly under current circumstances’.⁴⁹

There are no simple solutions to the problems that face those who have to conceptualise close combat in the future and prepare accordingly. It is not a task that can be left to a few experts working in lonely isolation. Instead, all military professionals need to participate in the debate about the

⁴⁹ Kilcullen, ‘Rethinking the Basis of Infantry Close Combat’, p. 38.

future of their core business—close combat. This brief paper has set out to initiate some debate about what innovations might best prepare our infantry for the challenges of 21st-century conflict. It is to be hoped that the officers and soldiers of the Army will not let these issues lie, but will take them up in the pages of their professional journals. As the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy has written:

We need to capture both our experience and our ideas in print. We need to debate, analyse and test both against the record of military history, present realities and future trends . . . Writing and fighting are, after all, not opposites but two sides of the same coin, and ultimately both activities define the profession of arms.⁵⁰

In order to discuss the patterns of change and continuity in the Australian infantry battalion over the past century, this paper has ranged far beyond Australia and considered combined arms, joint and coalition capabilities well beyond those of the foot soldier. This is because the infantry battalion no longer inhabits the sort of vacuum that those 1000-man battalions of simple riflemen did when they marched away in 1914. If the infantry battalion is to remain the ‘Queen of the Battlefield’ in the 21st century, it must adapt to the complex battlespace that it is called on to occupy. Australian infantry cannot be left behind as other information-age societies restructure their own forces in order to take advantage of all the protection that armoured mobility can provide. The objective of hardening the Australian Army is not just a slogan—it has to become a state of mind if our infantry is not going to join the ranks of the highly vulnerable, obsolete industrial-age forces of the underdeveloped world.

⁵⁰ Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, ‘Message from the Chief of Army’, *Australian Army Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 2003, p. 5.

Almost a decade ago, in the conclusion to the classic second edition of *On Infantry*, John English and Bruce Gudmundsson forecast that light, highly mobile and lethally equipped infantry, supported by precision-guided missiles, would supplant mass infantry. ‘Retail’ as opposed to ‘wholesale’ infantry units would be more effective in both high-intensity operations and lower-level operations where discretion rather than destruction was required. As an infantryman himself, John English is under no illusions as to the bloody and messy business of combat on foot. He argues that:

Whatever weapon dominates the battlefield, there will always be times and places where vehicles cannot travel, Shells and missiles cannot reach, and electronic sensors cannot sense. There will, moreover, always be men who for reasons of poverty or strategy, prefer to fight their battles at the retail rather than the wholesale level. For this reason, there will always be a place for first-class infantry.⁵¹

Australia possesses that tradition of first-class infantry, but will no longer be able to afford the wholesale approach to infantry battle. As we seek to match the immutable values and ethos of the digger tradition with the realities of contemporary conflict, we need to remember that the battalion has been constantly evolving in structure and tactics. The battalion of World War II was designed to avoid the appalling casualties of World War I, and the Vietnam era battalion did not expect the mortality of its predecessors. Today we would not tolerate the wasteful attrition of the Vietnam War unless some clear military and political objective was at stake. Nonetheless, infantry, however employed and organised, must do what no other military unit

⁵¹ John A. English and Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *On Infantry*, rev. edn, Praeger, Westport, CT, 1994, pp. 177–8.

is expected to do. Writing forty years ago T. R. Fehrenbach put it best when he concluded:

A 'modern' infantry may ride sky vehicles into combat, fire and sense its weapons through instrumentation, employ devices of frightening lethality in the future—but it must also be old-fashioned enough to be iron-hard, poised for instant obedience and prepared to die in the mud.⁵²

⁵² Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, p. 706.

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