

Chapter 1

Exploring Why Australia Goes to War

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Walk into any bookshop in Australia and you'll realise that military history excites the interest of many Australians. History helps us understand who we are as a people, and most Australians understand that the experience of war has been a major factor in making the nation what it is today.

Yet many other countries have been affected by war to a much greater degree than Australia. The United States, for example, fought a war of independence with Britain and endured a dreadful civil war. Most countries of Europe have been invaded. Even Britain, which was last invaded by the Normans in 1066 and fought its last civil war in the 17th century, had its cities flattened in a prolonged German bombing campaign in 1940 and 1941. Elsewhere, countries have fought wars for independence or wars of national liberation.

By contrast with those other countries, since white settlement Australia has never been invaded by a foreign power. The Australian colonies didn't need to fight Britain to win their independence. Modern Australia has never been wracked by civil war. Ethnic conflict in Australia has never led to savage fighting such as we have seen in places like Bosnia, Rwanda or Sri Lanka in recent years. Contests between competing ideologies, such as occurred during the Korean War in the early 1950s, have never touched Australian shores.

In this chapter I explain why Australia has gone to war and how it has helped shape Australia. I then describe the part played by historians, and why Australians continue to be fascinated and inspired by the Anzac legend.

Where Australians Have Fought

Apart from the conflicts with the Aborigines, all of Australia's wars have been fought overseas. In this book I tell of Australia's involvement in 14 wars. These are:

- ✔ **New Zealand, 1863–64.** Australian volunteers served in locally raised British units (see Chapter 3).
- ✔ **Sudan, 1885.** A New South Wales contingent assisted British forces (see Chapter 3).
- ✔ **South Africa, 1899–1902.** The colonies and later the new Commonwealth of Australia sent contingents to assist the British (see Chapter 4).
- ✔ **First World War, 1914–18.** Australia sent troops and ships to assist the Empire (see chapters 5 to 9).
- ✔ **Second World War, 1939–45.** Australia sent military forces to assist the Empire in Europe and the Middle East (see chapters 10 to 13), and then fought with the allies in the Pacific (see chapters 14 to 17).
- ✔ **Korean War, 1950–53.** Australian forces fought with the United Nations (see Chapter 18).
- ✔ **Malaya, 1950–60.** Australia sent military units to assist Britain and the Malayan Government in the Malayan Emergency (see Chapter 19).
- ✔ **Malaysia, 1964–66.** Australian forces assisted Britain and Malaysia in countering Indonesia's 'Confrontation' with Malaysia (see Chapter 19).
- ✔ **South Vietnam, 1962–72.** Australian forces assisted South Vietnam and the United States (see Chapter 20).
- ✔ **Gulf War, 1991.** Australian ships assisted the US-led coalition (see Chapter 22).
- ✔ **Afghanistan, 2001–02.** Australian forces assisted the United States (see Chapter 22).
- ✔ **Iraq War 2003.** Australian forces assisted the US-led coalition (see Chapter 22).
- ✔ **Iraq 2005–09.** Australian forces assisted the US-led coalition (see Chapter 22).
- ✔ **Afghanistan, 2005–.** Australia sent units to assist the force organised by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (see Chapter 22).

Why Australians Have Fought

The big question in Australian military history is why the nation has fought in so many wars. The short answer is that Australians, like all peoples, crave security. People feel secure if they believe that they're unlikely to be invaded, and people feel safe if they can go about their lives without fear of starving or of being mistreated. The great paradox is that while Australians have fought in 14 wars in the last 150 years, for most of that time Australia has been one of the most secure lands on Earth. In this regard, Australia has been the lucky country, and there are a variety of reasons for this.

- ✓ Australia is an island continent and any potential enemy needs to cross the oceans before it can mount an attack.
- ✓ Apart from the Aborigines, for most of its modern history Australia has been relatively free from ethnic and racial conflict. (I discuss conflict with the Aborigines in Chapter 3.)
- ✓ Australia has always been largely self-sufficient in food, so Australians knew that whatever might happen elsewhere they would not starve.
- ✓ Australians have always been ruled by democratic governments. With minor exceptions, such as at the Eureka Stockade in 1854 (see Chapter 3), Australians have never felt that they needed to take up arms against the government.
- ✓ Australia has no natural or historical enemies in the way that Koreans hate the Japanese, or in past centuries, the way Britain and France were enemies.
- ✓ Australia was part of the most powerful empire in the world, the British Empire. Then Australia became allied with the United States. Having powerful friends in a dangerous world is very comforting.

Some of the attributes that made Australia secure could also work to make Australians feel insecure. For example, if an enemy turned up unexpectedly Australia was a long way from its friends. And while Australia seemed remote from the wars in Europe, even just rumours of wars could cause concern. Clinging precariously to a foothold on a vast continent across the other side of the world from Britain, the early settlers, who were few in number, knew that their security and safety could be affected by conflicts elsewhere. The colonists feared that foreign warships would suddenly appear and threaten to bombard their cities. With the rise of Japan at the end of the 19th century, Australians feared that if Britain was preoccupied in Europe Australia might be exposed to attack by Japan.

Just as people in the community feel safe if they see the police walking the beat, a nation feels more secure if its armed forces have the ability to defeat the enemy. If the nation is small and its armed forces are weak, the next best way to feel secure is to have some reliable friends. The young Australian colonies expected to gain security through their membership of the British Empire. They hoped that Britain's Royal Navy would keep enemy fleets away from Australia and would protect their seaborne commerce. In return, and to a very limited degree, the colonies thought that they should help pull their weight in defending the Empire.

So volunteers went off to fight in New Zealand, and soldiers went to Sudan, and in larger numbers to South Africa. Australia continued to seek security by supporting its great and powerful friends in wars overseas, hoping that they would help Australia in time of need.

Australianists and Imperialists

After Federation in 1901 the new nation's politicians and military leaders needed to consider how they would go about defending Australia. They broadly divided into two camps, the Australianists and the Imperialists.

- ✓ The **Australianists** believed that Australia should look after its own defence. Australia should form its own Navy and should possess a large Army made up of compulsorily enlisted part-time soldiers. The Army should not be permitted to serve overseas, but should be kept in Australia for home defence.
- ✓ The **Imperialists** believed that Australia couldn't defend itself alone and that Australia was best defended by cooperating with other British Empire countries. If the Empire were threatened elsewhere, then Australia should send troops overseas and Australian ships should operate as part of Britain's Royal Navy.

These apparently opposing views were not held in absolute terms. Australian ships could serve near home and across the world. People who believed in home defence could also see the value of working with the British Empire. Most Australians accepted that it was better to fight enemies far from Australia than to wait until they drew closer.

The Australianist and Imperialist approaches to Australian defence still exist, although with different names. After the Second World War the Imperialists became supporters of the Western Alliance. They believed that Australia needed to cooperate with its allies around the world. On the other hand, following the philosophy of the earlier Australianists, many Australians were still wary of sending forces overseas. As recently as 2007 the Howard Liberal-National Party Government argued that troops needed

to serve in Iraq in support of the US-led coalition, while the Labor Party Opposition, led by Kevin Rudd, vowed to withdraw the troops if they won the 2007 election. Labor won and withdrew the troops.

But the reasons for supporting allies are more complex than simply paying an insurance premium on future security. Australia has been willing to lend its support to defeating evil regimes. The First World War was fought to defeat Prussian militarism. In the Second World War Australian servicemen fought to destroy the evils of Nazism, Fascism and Japanese barbarism. They truly felt that they were fighting in a noble cause. The clichés that we hear on Anzac Day, such as ‘they gave their lives to keep us free’, have a large measure of truth. In later wars Australians have fought communism and jihadism. (The *jihadists* are Muslims who believe in fighting a holy war.)

Global conflicts that shaped the nation

Without question, the two world wars were the largest and most costly wars that Australians have been involved in, and they shaped the new nation. From a population of fewer than five million people, in the First World War Australia sent more than 300,000 soldiers to fight overseas and about 60,000 of them were killed. Few families in Australia were untouched in some way.

The men who fought at Gallipoli in 1915 were known as Anzacs because they served in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). Their achievement at Gallipoli, with its mateship, courage and endurance, became immortalised as the ‘Anzac legend’. The new nation of Australia found its identity on the slopes of Gallipoli. The soldiers, sailors and airmen who served in later wars were seen as upholding the Anzac legend or demonstrating the Anzac spirit. (For the story of the Anzac Corps and the Anzac legend see chapters 5 and 6.)

The Second World War shaped the nation perhaps even more. Around the world Australian servicemen reconfirmed the Anzac legend, but there were broader effects. The industrialisation of Australia began during the war. Threatened with invasion, Australians realised that in future they would need to look to their own security. As a result, the post-war government introduced a massive immigration scheme that helped build up the Australian economy.



Australians have rarely needed to fight in direct defence of Australia. The only major occasion was in 1941–42 when Japanese forces advanced through South-East Asia, bombed northern Australian towns, and actually ventured into Sydney Harbour in mini-submarines. The Australian troops serving in New Guinea felt that they were fighting to prevent a Japanese invasion.

Supporting our friends

Since the Second World War Australia has been involved in nine wars in which the chief reason for becoming involved was to support our allies, Britain and particularly the United States. But often the support has also been for a UN mission. For example, the US-led operations in the Korean War and in the Gulf in 1991 were authorised by the United Nations.



Critics of Australia's involvement in these wars have usually claimed that Australia was unnecessarily subservient to Britain or the United States. In response the government has usually made three strong arguments:

- ✔ Australia's interests are served by strengthening its alliance with the United States, which is the most powerful factor in ensuring Australia's future security.
- ✔ Many of the wars, such as the Korean War, the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq in 2003–09 and Afghanistan, were supported by the wider international community.
- ✔ The wars conducted by Britain and the United States were fully justified and Australia supported their aims.

Large groups in the Australian community have disagreed vociferously with these arguments. In particular, many people opposed Australia's involvement in Vietnam in 1966 and Iraq in 1991 and 2003. But the decisions have generally been supported by the majority of Australians.

Doing good in the world

Apart from being involved in wars, Australians have served overseas in many other circumstances. These include:

- ✔ Occupying an enemy country after a war, such as in Japan in 1946–50 (see Chapter 18).
- ✔ Contributing to United Nations peacekeeping missions (see Chapter 21).
- ✔ Contributing to regionally organised peacekeeping missions, such as in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands (see Chapter 21).
- ✔ Maintaining troops in a friendly country to assist with their security, such as in Malaysia (see Chapter 19).
- ✔ Training the armies of friendly countries in the aftermath of war, such as in Uganda, or helping countries to become more secure, such as in Papua New Guinea (see Chapter 21).

- ✓ Helping to rebuild countries after conflict, such as clearing land mines in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Cambodia (see Chapter 21).
- ✓ Providing humanitarian assistance after natural disasters, such as in Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami.

There are many reasons Australia has become involved in such activities. Obviously it's good for Australia if the world is a more peaceful place. But Australia is especially interested in trying to ensure that nearby countries don't become places that can harbour enemies, so Australia has put more emphasis on peacekeeping and assistance missions in these countries. Sometimes our allies have asked us to take part in certain operations. Usually Australia has sent forces overseas for a combination of reasons.

On occasions, however, Australia has been motivated simply by a desire to do good works. Australia's long-serving Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, declared that Australia was an 'international good citizen'. For the troops, some of the most satisfying missions have been when they've been able to ease pain and suffering, or help people to live more peacefully.

Remembering Our Military History

Interest in Australian military history is strengthened because most Australians know that their troops have fought and sacrificed their lives for the defence and security of Australia. They also appreciate that most of the Australians who've been killed in war fought as volunteers and almost all of them died in distant lands.

Thousands of Australians now travel to foreign countries to see where their relatives fought. Perhaps they want to understand why so many of their forebears were willing to leave the relative comfort of home and to risk their lives fighting around the world.

Revisiting the stories of Australia at war

Australian military history is obviously concerned with the experiences and exploits of Australia's armed forces in war. But military history comes in many forms, including:

- ✓ Comprehensive histories of Australia's involvement in major wars
- ✓ Studies of high-level policy making
- ✓ Histories of particular battles and military campaigns

- ✓ Biographies of military leaders
- ✓ Analyses of military tactics and techniques
- ✓ Personal memoirs and stories of the exploits of remarkable individuals
- ✓ Histories of military units and organisations
- ✓ Sociological studies of subjects such as morale and leadership
- ✓ Studies of how war has affected society

The stories of Australia's war experiences are told by all sorts of people, ranging from professional historians like me who work in universities, through to journalists, former military people and enthusiastic (but often very talented) amateurs.

Australia's most famous military historian was the journalist Charles Bean, who accompanied the Australian troops in the First World War and wrote most of the 12-volume official history of the war. Bean told the story of ordinary Australians and he emphasised the war's role in helping to give Australians a sense of belonging to one nation. The official historians of the later wars followed Bean's model. Few Australians have read the official histories — they're too long and detailed — but they've become the starting point for almost all other writings on the major Australian wars.

Australian military history has been told in feature films. Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) portrays the Australian Light Horse in the First World War. Bruce Beresford's *Breaker Morant* (1980) is set in the Boer War and Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981) focuses on the Gallipoli campaign. Military history also appears in television documentaries and dramas.

The stories of Australians at war can be found in thousands of books and magazine articles. Hundreds of television documentaries have been produced. No one organisation or group of people can own Australian military history. Anyone who wishes to take the time and effort can have his or her say. Most historians try to be accurate and factual, but history is always open to interpretation and argument.

Honouring the Anzac legend

Australians continue to be fascinated with and inspired by the Anzac legend and they honour it by keeping the story alive. Beyond books and films, Australians are made aware of their military history through commemorative activities. The most obvious example takes place on Anzac Day (25 April) when men and women who have served in the armed forces march through the nation's cities and towns, and lay wreaths at war memorials.

The government and private citizens continue to find more ways to honour the Anzacs. In the past, memorials were constructed in France, Belgium and at Gallipoli. In recent years the government has built memorials in places such as Isurava on the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea, at Hellfire Pass on the notorious Thai-Burma Railway in Thailand and at Le Hamel in northern France.

In 1995 the Commonwealth Government organised the 'Australia Remembers' year to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. More controversially, in 2008 the government announced that the first Wednesday in September would become 'Battle of Australia' Day to commemorate the defence of Australia in the Second World War. Many historians have pointed out that there was never an actual battle of Australia.

An entire industry has now been built on honouring the Anzac legend. Whether prime ministers and governments have fostered this industry for political purposes (because they know that it strikes a chord in the community) or whether governments have merely responded to a mood from within the community is hard to determine. Whatever the answer might be, there is no doubt that Australians have an abiding interest in their military history.

