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LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

Recent changes at the Australian War Memorial

an address¹ to the Institution on 25 September 2007 by
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Director, Australian War Memorial

Over the past decade, the Australian War Memorial in Canberra has embarked on an ambitious building programme and its exhibits and other services that it provides have undergone some profound changes. In this paper, Steve Gower, the Director who has overseen this reformation, outlines the changes that have been made and explains the vision and philosophy that have underpinned them.

It is a great pleasure to have this opportunity today of outlining recent developments at the Australian War Memorial. I have had the privilege of being Director and having stewardship of the Australian War Memorial since I resigned from the Army in 1996. The last 11 years have been a time of great change, challenge and satisfaction. Two new buildings have been constructed and over 60 per cent of the galleries have been redeveloped. Close to \$100 million has been spent on various developmental projects. Not all of this has come from government appropriations, although it has been very supportive. We have been very successful in recent years in attracting sponsorship – Dick Smith, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, ASC Pty Ltd, and QANTAS are now sponsors of ours.

Some people occasionally ask me how many days a week I go in to work as if it is some sort of part-time appointment. I doubt they would ask that of Ed Capon at the Art Gallery of New South Wales or Kevin Fewster at the Powerhouse Museum! I can assure you that being Director is a full-time business.

Our Operations

Let me give you an overview of our operations. There are 4 million items in the collection, and these are valued at \$1 billion. They range from four-engined bombers to submarines, tanks, guns, rifles and uniforms – even down to buttons and bows, literally.

Our budget this year is \$40 million, of which about 25 per cent comes from sponsorship, donations, interest from investments and revenue from our shop, e-Business activity and the Hyatt food and beverage contract.

The staff totals 290 full-time equivalents. There is a spread of professions and occupations: front-of-house people; event organisers; art and photographic curators; conservators in all sorts of disciplines; HR experts; security staff; historians; and librarians and archivists in the Research Centre. In addition there are about 200 volunteers at any one time.

The Memorial has been Australia's No. 1 Major Tourist Attraction for an unequalled three years in a row. We had over 5 million people visit, attend a travelling exhibition somewhere, or visit our website for a user session last financial year.

I believe the standards of museum practice we have are unequalled in Australia. Having said that, the Memorial is not only a museum, it is a shrine and an archive. That is what makes it unique, not only in Australia but around the world.

Capital Appeal

When I arrived as Director, a capital appeal was just finishing. It raised \$8 million against the hoped-for \$20 million. Council, in undertaking the appeal, had realised that the place was becoming rundown and in need of renovation. For example, the lower ground floor was a rabbit-warren, and it was difficult to find your way around the place. I think it fair to say that the Memorial was not in favour with government at the time, and in the absence of its support, Council had decided to turn to the public and to the private sector. Unfortunately, at around the time, there had been a Merit Protection Review Agency investigation, and a joint Department of Finance and Veterans' Affairs review of the Memorial's finances had indicated a yearly shortfall of about \$2 million.

\$8 million was clearly not enough for all the work that was needed, but we managed to get another \$7 million from the federal government for building maintenance. This was vital, as much of the building at the time did not meet the relevant codes.

¹Attended by 99 members and guests

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The Australian War Memorial [photo: Australian War Memorial]

Gallery Development Project, Stage 1

With \$15 million in the kitty, we set off on what we called the Gallery Development Project, Stage 1. This envisaged doing up the Second World War Galleries and Aircraft Hall, developing an Orientation Gallery, improving circulation paths for visitors and renovating the Research Centre. At the time, the last-mentioned popular facility could only be entered via the back door and it needed to be integrated much better. Looking back on it, Stage 1 was a very ambitious undertaking, and, to be frank, it was a matter at the start of the “blind-leading-the-blind”.

Being an engineer³, I knew something about project management, but nothing about combining building works with the creativity of developing successful new galleries. There seemed to be a number of options: you could outsource the job; or do it yourself. With the former, you lost control; adoption of the latter could swamp you. We ended up picking an intermediate course. This entailed engaging a project management consultant to bring to us up-to-date knowledge throughout the course of the project about contracts, tendering, the engagement of contractors and consultants and the supervision of their work. For our part, among other things, we had to produce the concepts for our new galleries – what were the key stories and themes, what relics were available to tell the stories, and so on; the design brief for the architect – just how we wanted the gallery spaces renovated; and a design brief for potential gallery designers. Then we had to make it all happen.

To pull it all together, we decided to appoint our own in-house project manager. This person would be advised by the project management consultant, and direct a multi-disciplinary team of curators, historians and other people who wanted to accept the challenge of producing all the necessary concepts, briefs, display lists, text panels, captions and so on.

This arrangement ended up working very well, but other places might well have their own way of going about similar developments. But whatever structure you set up, you have to remember where the responsibility and accountability lie. You cannot outsource that!

New galleries are essentially a compromise, a trade-off between the space available, the relics you have to tell stories, and the money you can apply to the project. Where you can make a difference is in:

- the creativity of the design and the application of multi-media; and
- consultation with stakeholders, to get the stories right and to sense what veterans think is important.

It is the stakeholders’ stories, after all, that you are telling. To ignore stakeholders is to risk problems, as we have seen overseas at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (with their intended controversial presentation of the story of the A-Bomb and the B-29 aircraft, *Enola Gay*), and at the Canadian War Museum over its revisionist treatment of Bomber Command in the Second World War. Both directors ended up resigning.

The other thing you need to do is to engage good consultants and contractors, and to have outstanding staff on your project team.

In 1997 we started off reviving our galleries. After a lot of hard work, they were opened by Prime Minister John Howard in March 1999. At the same time he opened the first stage of our new sculpture garden, which now covers the entire western precinct. A year later we opened our new Aircraft Hall. This was a “black box” design with the ceilings, air conditioning ducts and other fittings blacked out so that the total focus was on the specially lit display of seven aircraft. A mezzanine floor was an integral part of the design so as to enable viewing of the exhibits from different levels.

Both these projects were very well-received by both stakeholders and the general public. This was pleasing, as the Memorial occupies a special place within the Australian community, that community has high expectations, and it is vital that public needs are

³Not to overlook being a gunner in the Army

fulfilled. I am not saying you should be populist to achieve this, but you need to concentrate on presenting uplifting and extraordinary stories of ordinary Australian men and women to engage and interest visitors. And finally, when designing galleries or planning any activity, it has to be remembered that the Memorial is not a place dealing with just the history of warfare as such, nor that of the Australian Defence Force for that matter.

ANZAC Hall

Before we'd finished Aircraft Hall, we became aware there was money available for worthy projects from the Centenary of Federation grants. We accordingly put in a bid for a new building at the rear of the main building, something envisaged in the 1980s by the then management, but never successfully funded. This time we were fortunate in being allocated \$13.5 million.

We had an outstanding design developed by the leading Australian architectural firm, Denton Corker Marshall (DCM), up our sleeves and were ready to roll when we got the money in late 1999. In March 2000, the soil was broken by our Minister mounted on a back hoe, and, in June 2001, the Prime Minister opened the new building, called ANZAC Hall. This was a project that produced a speedy outcome, but we had a well-practised team by then and were confident we could produce something outstanding. Good risk management had something to do with it too. The building subsequently was awarded the Sir Zelman Cowan Award for the best public building in Australia.

Object theatre

The interior displays were equally innovative. Rather than have relics just lined up side-by-side, we decided to pioneer a new technique we had never seen before and at the time was only a concept, "object theatre", the dramatic use of sound, light and images to tell the story of a major object. We decided to use this technique to produce three shows of about eight minutes each. *G for George*, our great Lancaster bomber that survived 89 operations, was an obvious choice. Its show would



The World War II Lancaster bomber, G for George, on display [photo: Australian War Memorial]

be called *Striking by Night*. Another was about the Japanese midget submarines that entered Sydney Harbour on the night of 31 May 1942 and was called *Sydney under Attack*. The final one was titled *Our First Naval Victory*, and recounted the epic story of HMAS *Sydney* vanquishing SMS *Emden* off the Cocos Islands in November 1914.

One of the shows, *Striking by Night*, was not working to my satisfaction a week out from the opening, but it was ready on the night. It is important not only to keep your nerve, but to have a contingency available to bring displays up to expectations.

These shows have been tremendously well-received by the public. I think visitors are engaged and enthused by the technique, and hopefully want to wind-down by having coffee and cake at our Hyatt outlet on the nearby mezzanine.

C.E.W. Bean Building

With the success of ANZAC Hall, we convinced our then Minister, Bruce Scott, who was an outstanding supporter, to have included in the 2001 Coalition election platform the funding of a new building. This was intended to house collection items and staff displaced from the main building, thereby freeing up 1,300m² of space for long-overdue Post-1945 Galleries. We needed these new galleries, as the stories of the 110,000 men and women who had been involved in all the commitments of this period were very poorly presented.

We had to wait almost three years for the funding. In the meantime, we funded DCM to develop the design of the building, which was eventually opened by the new Veterans' Affairs Minister, Bruce Billson, in April 2006 and was named in honour of the great First World War official war correspondent and historian, C.E.W. Bean.

Post-1945 Galleries

With the staff and collection moved out, we could get on to planning the new gallery spaces. This project turned out to be the most difficult project I have experienced in my time at the Memorial. The reason was latent conditions – unexpected situations relating to the building that could not reasonably be foreseen by the architect, project manager or builder, let alone by us.

We have worked through all the problems, found the necessary funds to cover the contract variations and now are well on the way to finishing the galleries. This is a \$23 million project which essentially we are funding ourselves. That was an integral part of the arrangements when we received the earlier capital injection from government for the C.E.W. Bean Building.

In the new galleries we want to:

- have a sense of place, if possible;
- reinvigorate the diorama tradition;
- make the maximum use of multi-media in all its various applications;

- ensure we get the stories right by applying high standards of scholarship, backed up by stakeholder consultation; and
- have young people as a priority target.

There will be segments in the new galleries dealing with the Cold War, Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam, Peacekeeping and Post-Cold War conflict. Our RAAF Iroquois helicopter will be a key exhibit and it will be the centrepiece of two multi-media shows. We are using the Battle of Bribie in 1967 as the basis of a heliborne assault presentation (our helicopter was on that operation) and then a dust-off mission will be simulated using actual radio transmissions. Both will feature footage projected onto two large screens around the aircraft.

Getting sufficient space to display the Iroquois initially caused a lot of problems. We had to demolish what turned out to be an ultra-strong, double-reinforced concrete floor, remove three columns holding up the First World War galleries above (with the load being transferred by beams to adjoining columns), and open up a large access doorway in a side wall. All that for a helicopter! However, it was inconceivable that you could have a Vietnam display without an Iroquois.

We also intend to present an immersive re-creation of the Battle of Long Tan on a surround screen (filming has taken place at Mackay and Puckapunyal); and install the bridge of HMAS *Brisbane* outside, where it will be connected to the galleries by a linking bridge. We will be bringing the bridge alive by using its numerous loudspeakers and by generating an artificial moving horizon on the windows with LCD screens.

I am confident these will be a great set of galleries, but I say that accepting that not all worthy stories can be told, and some will inevitably be disappointed.

Eastern Precinct Redevelopment

After all that, we have been allocated \$11.5 million to redevelop our eastern precinct, including an underground car park for over 200 cars, something we have needed for many years. The National Gallery of Australia has always had one, as will the new National Portrait Gallery. A memorial to those who participated in the National Service schemes will be located in this precinct.

Other Developments

I should mention a few other developments that have occurred:

- **Plaque Dedication Program.** Over 140 individual plaques for units that have seen active service have now been installed in our sculpture garden, together with five major sculptural memorial installations – Servicewomen, Sandakan, Bomber Command, British Commonwealth Occupation Force (Japan), and the Merchant Navy.
- **Travelling Exhibitions Program.** At any one time we have up to seven exhibitions travelling around all states and territories. Over 2 million Australians

have seen our exhibitions over the last decade.

- An **Official History of Peacekeeping** has commenced with Professor David Horner as the Official Historian⁴. An Australian Research Council linkage grant of \$1 million with the Australian National University has helped funding immeasurably. The Department of Defence is paying for David Horner's services; and we are providing two historians and research assistants from our staff resources.
- The **Official War Artist** scheme has been reinvigorated as well as the corresponding programme for **photographers**. For some reason, these had gone into recess after the Vietnam War. We recommenced the programme in 1999 for East Timor and have since sent artists to all subsequent ADF commitments.
- We now have an active **Friends** programme and produce our **Wartime** magazine four times a year.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying there are further gallery development projects in the offing: renovation of the Hall of Valour; and then the First World War Galleries. And we have already started early planning on ways to recognise the centenary of the Gallipoli landing. My successor, however, can concern him or herself with those.

The Author: Steve Gower graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, into the Royal Australian Artillery and, after gaining a Master of Engineering degree from the University of Adelaide for research on fluid mechanics, served as a forward observer in Vietnam in 1966-67. Following post-graduate training on guided weapons in the United Kingdom, he became manager of the Rapier missile project in Australia. In 1981-82, he served on exchange with the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command; and, in 1995, was promoted to Major General and appointed General Officer Commanding Training Command. He resigned from the Australian Army in 1996 to become Director of the Australian War Memorial, where he has overseen a period of major renewal, redevelopment and expansion. The Memorial has been judged Australia's best tourist attraction for three consecutive years and is now in the Tourism Hall of Fame. He is a former chair of the Council of Australian Museum Directors and has served on the museum management board of the International Council of Museums. He is an Officer in both the General and Military Divisions of the Order of Australia. [Photo of General Gower: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC]

⁴For more details, see: Horner, D M (2006). Recent military operations and their place in Australian history *United Service* 57 (2), 11 – 16 (June 2006).