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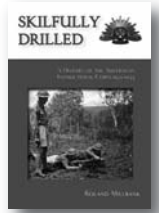


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Skilfully drilled: a history of the Australian Instructional Corps 1921-1955

Roland Millbank

*Barrallier Books: West Geelong VIC; 384 pp.; ISBN 9780646477909; RRP \$24.95;
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A book with this title is almost guaranteed to *either* attract immediate interest or encourage a potential reader to gloss over it, as it focuses on a perceived, non-glamorous aspect of Australian military operations – the small cadre of permanent force instructors who were the literal ‘backbone’ of a largely volunteer military force.

In 1921, 600 professional soldiers – selected staff sergeant majors – were transferred to the newly formed Australian Instructional Corps (AIC), whose role was to provide all-corps instruction to the whole Field Army. The AIC as a Corps never served in an overseas or combat role, and therefore there are no war diaries to record its exploits or achievements.

The AIC was responsible for every aspect of practical training throughout the entire Army in all States and Territories. In some version or other, this role persisted until the disbandment of the AIC in 1955. “Essentially, the AIC’s task was to train the instructors, who would then instruct the militia officers and NCOs who would in turn train their own units” (Millbank, p. xix).

The book’s author, Roland Herbert Millbank, is a resident of the Hunter Region. He had reserve service in both the Royal Air Force Observer Corps and the Australian military, attaining the rank of major in the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. *Skilfully Drilled* took him 14 years to complete, and it provides a very specialized, very high quality publication, based on meticulous research and thoughtful collation of masses of relevant detail. Consequently, the book provides an incredible wealth of information about the staff and achievements of the AIC.

The author explains very clearly and concisely how a small immigrant population inhabiting only the fringes of a vast continent and perceiving itself as a far outpost of the British Empire created the conditions which led to a uniquely Australian response to training an Army – the AIC.

The book provides a chronological, 13-chapter sequence tracing the discernable ‘eras’ or ‘phases’ of the AIC over the period 1921-1955. These chapters, each accompanied by extensive notes and appendices, are used

to explain the differing challenges and responses required from the AIC over the period of its existence spanning the periods following World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and then the post-war period leading to loss of identity and focus and the eventual disbandment of the AIC in 1955 – when the raising of a larger Australian Regular Army (ARA) and the creation of specialist ARA training schools led to the eventual demise of the AIC.

Each part of the book (*i.e.* a chapter with its supporting notes and appendices) provides almost ‘information overload’ – with extensive statistics, data and references to support that aspect of the evolving AIC story. In addition, there is an extensive set of extra appendices, tables and photographs providing vast amounts of individual level information (*e.g.* a nominal roll of all AIC members, interviews with surviving/available members or close family). The book concludes with detailed referencing of primary and secondary sources, and is extensively indexed. A major achievement of this author is his ability to keep such a complex and data-rich book both interesting and readable!

The major appeal of the book is its exceptionally high quality research base, plus the immense effort provided by the author to successfully bring pattern and order to an amazing amount of data about this relatively obscure topic.

This reviewer was left with great admiration for the dedication and effectiveness of the regular non-commissioned staff of the AIC, who consistently provided high-level, quality training to the Australian Military Forces, despite the shabby and often callous ways in which they were treated!

Overall, this is a meticulously researched and thoughtfully prepared book that may not have wide appeal because of its specialist topic. The overall value of *Skilfully Drilled* is its serious analysis of the AIC, and the author is to be highly commended for the incredible amount of effort he has committed to producing this readable and exceptionally well researched and presented resource for the specialist reader or researcher of military history.

Michael Hough