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BOOK REVIEW

The Collins class submarine story – steel, spies and spin

by Peter Yule and Derek Woolner

*Cambridge University Press: Port Melbourne, 2008,
364 pp., ISBN 139780521868945
RRP \$59.95 (hardcover)*

The construction of the Collins-class submarines was Australia's largest and most expensive military purchase of the 20th century – the total cost exceeded \$6 billion. This book tells the story of the project from its origins in the late 1970s to the final delivery of the sixth boat in 2003.

An intriguing feature of the book is that its two authors, Peter Yule and Derek Woolner, were not personally involved in this significant and controversial activity. Peter is a research fellow in the History Department of the University of Melbourne. Derek is a visiting fellow in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. In my view their selection was brilliant. They both came to the task with no preconceptions and gained their knowledge from interviewing more than 120 persons who had been involved over the years and from Defence and Navy archives.

The story is much more than the building of submarines. There is high politics throughout – the challenge to a Labor Cabinet to outlay an investment on this scale; the decision to build in Australia; and then, with a change of Government and initial problems with the boats, Prime Minister Howard's ministers using the project as a weapon to attack the former Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, the then Opposition Leader.

The authors also explore the divisions within the Navy (perhaps all navies?) between surface and submarine elements. They point out that many of the problems faced within the project reflect the distrust submariners held of the fleet at large and its then senior officers, and vice versa.

Add to this the matter of commercial interests. The book deftly leads us through the maze of negotiations as to which design, which combat system and which companies should have been involved. There were major local industry issues and the late Minister for Industry, John Button, was a key player. This project has been described as a tale of passions, intrigue, lies, spies and backstabbing. And the authors bring this off; there were many friendships lost and grudges are still held. I found it compelling to keep turning the pages to see who would win the next tussle.

At the end, the nation has a fleet of exceptional submarines, much advantage was gained within local industry and the political storm seems to have abated.

This is a well constructed history of an important national project, well worth the read and, I suggest, essential pre-reading for future directors of major projects.

Tony Hunt