

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

Commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, 1950–1953

Rear Admiral Ian Crawford, AO, AM (Mil), RAN (Ret'd)¹

Over the last two years, activities commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Korean War of 1950–1953 have been held in many parts of the world. As these activities draw to a close, the time has come to lay to rest the identification of that war as the ‘forgotten war’.

Sixtieth anniversaries in Asian cultures are important celebrations because life expectancies in the past made a life of 60 years an achievement to be honoured by a traditional recognition.

Australians have good reason to recognise the benefits for this country that stemmed from the decision to commit our sailors, soldiers and airmen to repel the attack of North Korea on South Korea in 1950. The 17,000 Australians who fought in navy, army or air force units in the Korean War ranged in age from 17-year-old midshipmen to over 40-year-old soldiers who had previously served in the Second World War. Of them, there are probably only 7000 alive today. Now is the right time for the Australian community to understand the significance of the Korean War as these 60th-year anniversary commemorations could be the last opportunity to honour their service.

Significance for All Australians

All Australians should take pride that the Australian government had the confidence in the fighting qualities of its armed forces to be prepared to commit units to join with other countries in a response to the United Nations Security Council’s resolution that: “the members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area”.

In the history of world conflicts, there are aspects of the conduct of wars and outcomes that set one conflict apart from others. For Australia’s involvement in the Korean War, placed as it was between the Second World War, with its national mobilisation involving the entire community, and the Vietnam War, with the social conflicts over our involvement and the use of national servicemen, there are very important features that set the Korean War apart from other conflicts. And yet the Korean War is often overlooked and became known as

the ‘forgotten war’. There is an intellectual reluctance to recognise the benefits to Australia of our involvement in this conflict.

The Australian community at the time generally accepted Australia’s support for the stand taken by the United Nations over Korea, although some extreme left-wing sympathisers were comfortable with Soviet and Chinese expansion and used communist ideological strategic logic to encourage the thought that what was happening in north-east Asia was none of our business. Nevertheless, the model for the Australian culture set by those who volunteered for the First and Second World Wars could still be called on to inspire young men. For the last time before we were to meet our strategic commitments solely from the regular and reserve cadres (and, in the case of Vietnam, recourse to national service), Australia could attract volunteers for service overseas in what was to be *The Last Call of the Bugle* (the title of a book about the Korean War written by Jack Gallaway).

Australia is sharing the commemorative activities with other countries that formed the United Nations Command and notably the people and government of the Republic of Korea. For Australia, there is a focus on service and sacrifice, and on the qualities of leadership and military skills of our sailors, soldiers and airmen, which gained admiration amongst the other countries that formed the United Nations Command and, particularly, the people of Korea. The example set by our servicemen in Korea has nurtured these qualities in the present-day Royal Australian Navy, Australian Army and Royal Australian Air Force.

But there are outcomes of our Korean War involvement which influence Australia’s standing in the world and the quality of life derived from the strength of our economy. We should never lose sight of these national strategic outcomes.

Unlike the First and Second World Wars when Australia answered the British call, the Australian government committed its armed forces to the United Nation’s call to repel the attack on Korea independently of the British government’s decision. This was seen as important to demonstrate the independence of Australia, at a time when relations between the United Kingdom and the United States of America were strained, and to further develop close relations between Australia and the United States in the Pacific. These close relations with the United States, reinforced by the Korean War experience, evolved into shared strategic planning initiatives, such as the Radford-

¹Ian Crawford, who served as a midshipman on HMS *Ceylon* in the early stages of the Korean War, has been a member of the Institute since 1954. The government of the Republic of Korea has recognised his services to Korea by awarding him the Order of Diplomatic Service Merit.

Collins agreement, which identified sea areas of responsibility between the United States and Australia, and the ANZUS Treaty. Over time, and through other conflicts, these strategic bonds have continued to strengthen.

Notwithstanding the independent decision to commit its forces, Australian naval and army units were positioned under command of British formations within the United Nations Command structures, but under the operational control of United States generals and admirals. A measure of the close comradeship between the Australian and British soldiers was the pride taken by Australian veterans in being members of the British Commonwealth Division and their insistence that the division badge should be included on the face of the Australian National Korean War Memorial in Canberra.

As the situation in Korea deteriorated and American and South Korean forces withdrew to the Pusan perimeter, the hard-pressed United States government was glad to have Australia's military participation. An important product of America's gratitude, and with implications that we enjoy today in Australia, was the way President Truman in 1950 influenced the outcome of Australia's application to the World Bank for a loan of \$250 million for development. By some accounts, Australia did not meet the criteria for a loan. In any case, when the approval was given, it came without the usual condition of commitment to specific projects and could be used to develop the infrastructure for the exploitation of our resources.

This loan facility, taken with the demand for our strategic resources of wool and minerals, launched an era of economic progress that underpins the quality of life that we enjoy today. The Korean winter of 1950-51, when the weather came out of Manchuria, is recognised as the coldest winter of the century, and is still a benchmark for extreme cold; hands froze to the metal parts of rifles and sea-spray formed ice on ships' superstructures. These conditions created a demand for Australian wool. With the belief that Korea would escalate to a Third World War, the demand for Australia-sourced strategic materials of wool and minerals set the scene for decades of economic prosperity that we all shared. Of course, there are some who would wonder whether 'a pound a pound' for wool was a good thing and the dilemmas later faced by our wool industry from the excesses of those times are still evident.

Australia's Involvement in Korean War Operations

The commitment of Australian units was the more effective because units of all three services were located in Japan. HMA Ships *Shoalhaven* and *Bataan* and No. 77 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, were soon involved in Korean War operations. There was also the important part played by Major Stuart Peach and Squadron Leader Ronald Rankin when, in May

1950, the Australian government provided the only response to the request of the United Nations Commission on Korea for observers to report on the increasing tensions between North and South Korea. Their report, delivered on the day before North Korean units pushed into South Korea across the 38th parallel, provided the evidence needed to permit the United Nations Security Council's resolution. This was yet another example in Australia's history of being a responsible member of the world community through the availability of its armed forces.

The Korean War is identified by distinct phases. First, there was the withdrawal to the Pusan perimeter. This was followed by the 'mobile phase' during 1950 and 1951: the landing at Inchon; the breakout from the Pusan perimeter; the advances well into North Korea; and then the withdrawals, particularly after the Chinese entry into the war in November 1950. Two Australian commanding officers, Wing Commander Lou Spence of No. 77 Squadron and Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Green of 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, were among those killed in the desperate times of the 1950 'withdrawal' and 'mobile' phases'. The 'mobile' phase was followed in 1951 by the 'static phase' when the opposing land forces confronted each other, roughly along the line that from 27 July 1953 became the Demilitarised Zone, while awaiting the outcome of cease-fire talks.

It is fitting that we should draw on the wording on the plaques in the Contemplative Space of the Australian National Korean War Memorial, Canberra, to describe the nature of the service of the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force in the Korean War.

"THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY

Royal Australian Navy ships were committed to the Korean War on 29 June 1950 just four days after the war began. Freezing weather conditions tested men and equipment beyond the normal hazards of high seas, storms, typhoons, extreme tidal conditions and uncharted mud flats. Five members of the RAN died on active service in the Korean War.

Destroyers and frigates were employed in patrolling, engaging shore batteries, gun-fire support, carrier screening, support for island operations and evacuation cover in a threat environment from mining, air attack and counter bombardment. Notable actions were the landing at Inchon (September 1950), the evacuation of Chinnampo (November 1950), the withdrawal from Inchon (January 1951) and the Han Estuary bombardment. HMA Ships Shoalhaven, Bataan, Warramunga, Murchison, Anzac, Tobruk, Condamine and Culgoa were deployed during 1950-1953.

HMAS Sydney and its Fleet Air Arm squadrons attacked enemy supply lines and supported allied forces from October 1951 to January 1952.

The maritime supremacy of the United Nations Command was a factor in the outcome of the war."

"THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY

The Third Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR), commenced operations in early October 1950 and remained in Korea throughout the war. Two other battalions (1 RAR and 2 RAR) served in rotation in 1952-1953.

Many soldiers had previous active service and became part of the new Australian Regular Army while others enlisted in 'K Force', especially raised for the war. Army nurses, the Salvation Army and members of the Red Cross served in Japan and Korea. South Korean personnel (KATCOMs) frequently augmented and served with Australians.

3 RAR fought numerous actions in the 'mobile phase' of the war when close hand-to-hand combat was common. Battles in North Korea, known as the 'stepping stones', were fought at Sariwon, Yongju, Pakchon and Chongju. Later 3 RAR fought the major battles at Kapyong and Maryang San.

The last 20 months of the war, 'the static phase', involved raids against deeply entrenched Chinese positions and nightly fighting patrols to dominate no-man's land. Battles in the period included 1 RAR's attack against Hill 227 and Operation FAUNA in 1952 and the defensive battle by 2 RAR on the Hook in July 1953. As well as an aggressive enemy all units had to combat the intense Korean winter cold.

Army casualties were heavy with 239 killed, 1,210 wounded and 24 prisoners of war.

Of the numerous battle honours won by the RAR in Korea, three major honours are now emblazoned on Regimental Colours:

"Korea" 1950-1953 (1 RAR, 2 RAR, 3 RAR)

"Kapyong" April 1951 (3RAR)

"Maryang San" October 1951 (3 RAR)."

"THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

77 Squadron RAAF entered the Korean War during the first week of the North Korean aggression and remained in action for the entire war as part of the US 5th Air Force. Airpower was critical in defeating the initial North Korea offensive and the Australian squadron earned the highest reputation in giving close air support to ground forces.

Re-equipped with Meteor jet fighters in July 1951 this aircraft proved unsuited to aerial combat against the Soviet-supplied MiG 15 and subsequently the Australians reverted to the ground attack role where it continued its fine record. Notwithstanding, three MiGs were destroyed in air-to-air combat.

Climatic extremes, in particular the winter conditions in North Korea, seriously challenged both air and ground crews. In all there were 41 fatal casualties from all causes and 7 prisoners of war. Royal Air Force pilots made a significant contribution to

the squadron and five of them were killed.

Dakota transports from 91 Wing carried out skilled airlift for all British Commonwealth forces in Korea and flew some 12,000 sick and wounded from the war zone in medical evacuation flights. In this role the contribution by the RAAF Nursing Service proved invaluable."

Commemorating the War and the War Dead

On the commemorative plaque at the United Nations Memorial Cemetery, Pusan, where most of the Australian war dead are buried, are the names of 44 Australians who have no known grave. Efforts to locate and identify the remains of the missing-in-action continue, but they are frustrated because the operations where the missing were lost are in the De-militarised Zone or in North Korea. The numbers of the missing-in-action, commemorated in Canberra by the column at the Australian National Korean War Memorial, are a poignant reminder that, for many families, there is no grave for the focus of their grief.

While the main commemorative focus is on the years 1950 to 1953, the Australian navy, army and air force units that remained in Korea after the armistice from 1953 to 1956 under United Nations Command were important to reinforce to China and North Korea the determination to secure the independence of the Republic of Korea. Australians died during this service.

In its commemorative programmes, the Korean government is paying respect to and expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of all United Nations Forces personnel who defended the Republic of Korea and fought to preserve democracy. These programmes are an extension of the Revisit Korea Programme which, for over 30 years, has been offered by the government of Korea through the Korean Veterans Association (the Korean equivalent of our Returned and Services League). This programme allows veterans of the Korean War to return to Korea for a six-day commemorative tour, with costs of accommodation, meals and travel in Korea met by the Korean government.

Conclusion

Australian service men and women made an important and valuable contribution to the Korean War of 1950–1953. That contribution has been, and continues to be, appropriately acknowledged by the Republic of Korea and by the Australian government through the Australian National Korean War Memorial in Canberra. At a recent commemorative service at the Korean Chiel Church, the pastor said to the assembled Korean War veteran community: "We shall never forget you". The time now has come for the Australian public to be more broadly informed and to acknowledge this contribution so that the tag, 'the forgotten war', can be laid aside before all the veterans of that conflict pass on.