

[From Citizens to Soldiers: Robert Garran, The Australian, Edition 1, FRI 09/03/01, Page 014](#)

The digger endures as a symbol of the army, but the role has changed radically, writes Robert Garran

THE goal of the digger, says historian Bill Gammage, was "love of Empire". Lieutenant C.H. Ruddle, a Bundaberg schoolteacher, spelled out his motives in a letter home from Gallipoli in December 1915.

"The loss of life is appalling; rivers of blood ... the trenches red with the life blood of my comrades ... Sometimes I weary of it all and long for peace; it is on the fact that the safety of our loved ones, the integrity of our Empire is at stake that lifts one's spirits up again, to face the roughing and the grim horror of the battlefield."

Seventy-four years later in East Timor, the willingness of diggers to risk their lives was still a key element of military service.

"Big day. Last night at 0400 hrs the 6 Platoon patrol base or section post was attacked by up to a squad-sized group of militia," Corporal "Boots" Wellington wrote in his diary in June last year. "The militia moved within 30m of the fortified building and threw six grenades at once, all exploding into the area directly outside where the section and two carrier crewmen were sleeping. They fired several rounds from a 7.62mm G 3 into the building ... No Aussies were hurt in the attack. This was the first time I had seen or experienced deadly force being brought to bear on us. It is definitely Australian soldiers who are the target now!"

The fear of death was just as real, but many things had changed by the time Corporal Wellington visited East Timor since the time of the original digger.

"In World War I there was a general expectation in Australian society that young men and not so young men would serve, that they would flock to the standards of Empire," says Alan Ryan, a historian at the army's land warfare studies centre.

"If Britain went, of course Australia would go too; we were all in it together. Today there's a definite tendency for many young Australians to leave it to the professionals."

The Australian Army, 100 years old last week, fought in six wars in its first seven decades, but in the next three fought in none at all. Instead of wars, the army has increasingly been called to take part in peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, still dangerous, but with a much less intensive tempo.

There have been other dramatic changes too. The army has evolved from a citizens' volunteer army to a professional force, and Australia has grown from an outpost of the British Empire to an independent player in the region.

A century ago, on March 1, 1901, control of state defence forces passed to the new federal government. But the shape and purpose of the army have gone through so many changes since then that some historians believe today's army is a completely different beast.

Ryan argues in a paper to be delivered to the army's centenary history conference today that the army's longest-running fight has not been against enemies without, but between two different armies within.

All six of the Australian colonies sent soldiers to the Boer War a year before Federation, but it was World War I that created the image of the digger -- and led to the first battle between Australia's two armies.

Only 535 of the 16,000 Australian soldiers who went to South Africa in 1899 came from existing ranks, the rest were volunteers. When World War I arrived in 1914, the soldiers of Australia's permanent defence force were not allowed to be sent overseas, due to prevailing antagonism towards the military in government ranks, so a new volunteer army had to be created: the Australian Imperial Force.

The original digger was a volunteer, fighting in a bitter and prolonged world war. But the last time Australian soldiers fought in war was in Vietnam in 1972. The transition in the army was by then well under way. Soldiers in Vietnam were mainly regular professional forces, rather than a part-time militia forces.

The East Timor crisis in 1999 was different again. This was peace enforcement, not a war, and although 200 reservists took part, most of the Australian contingent were regular army professionals -- the ones who had to stay at home in World War I.

In the years after Federation, the prevailing view of the army was based on the idea of the citizen soldier. The Defence Act of 1903 forbade the creation of "regular" or professional infantry battalions. Instead, the government would rely on citizen soldiers, sometimes known as militia, and formally called the Citizen Military Forces.

In 1922 only 1600 of the army's total strength of 31,000 were full time, and until well into World War II the professionals were regularly passed over for command posts in favour of their militia counterparts.

In the two world wars the governments of the day raised separate expeditionary forces, the First and Second Australian Imperial Forces, rather than change the Defence Act to release militia for overseas service. The militia were not called to serve overseas until late in World War II in the Papua New Guinea and islands campaigns.

The First and Second AIFs were made up almost exclusively of citizens who enlisted for the war but did not expect to remain in the army in peace.

Among officers, the distinction between the staff and citizen corps caused considerable rivalry and tension. Ryan argues the decision in both wars to raise a volunteer force for overseas service and maintain a separate part-time home service force was disastrous.

"The performance of the militia battalions when they did go to war in 1942 proved that it was the quality of men, their training and their officers which counted," says Ryan. The formal reliance on the citizens' army remained until 1948, when the CMF remained the basis of the peacetime army, but for the first time a full-time infantry brigade was established.

Australia's strategic planners now considered Australia's security was not simply a matter of defending Australian territory. The creation of a full-time combat force, however small, was a turning point in the development of the army, says Ryan. The era had ended when the citizen soldier dominated the army, and the senior command for the first time was almost exclusively made up of regular soldiers.

In 1951, amid fears the Cold War would turn hot, prime minister Robert Menzies decreed the CMF must be trained along with an expeditionary force, as a keystone of British Commonwealth strategy in the Middle East in a feared global war. On turning 18, all Australian men were required to undertake 176 days compulsory service as members of the CMF. With only a small percentage of the army liable for combat service, and with most having only a basic level of training, this was still not a unified force.

Conscription ended in 1959, to be revived during the Vietnam War in 1965, this time with only a limited number of those turning 20 selected by ballot. For the first time, draftees could be compelled to serve outside Australia, making conscripts short-service regular soldiers, the "final abandonment of the notion that its citizen army would fight Australia's wars".

In 1974, after a report by T.M. Millar, the CMF was reshaped and renamed the Army Reserve, but it was not until this week that changes he had proposed passed the parliament, allowing reservists to serve overseas, giving them some employment protection when they returned -- and finally allowing the possibility of a unified army in which reserves could play a significant role.

Robert Garran is The Australian's foreign affairs and defence writer

The army's century

Wars:

Boer War -1899-1902

World War I -1914-18

World War II -1939-45

Korean War -1950-53

Malayan Emergency -1955-60

Vietnam War -1962-72

Peacekeeping-humanitarian:

Cambodia -1991-93

Somalia -1992

Rwanda -1994-95

Papua New Guinea drought and aid -1997-98

East Timor -1999-2001

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