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Reserve Commandos inherit a remarkable legacy

By BRIG 'Mac' Grant OAM RFD, the first Officer Commanding 1 Commando Company in 1955

Australia's Reservist commandos today, 50 years after re-forming in 1955, inherit a remarkable legacy of extraordinary achievement by both volunteer and regular special elements of the Australian military.

It's possible to talk about the extraordinary deeds of special forces in the distant past, but their activities of recent decades remain confidential, because what they do is almost invariably secret.

Special forces were and are constructs shaped by changing military needs.

Warfare over the past century has moved from set-piece, entrenched battles of the early 1900s through mobile, 'lightning' warfare of mid-century into guerrilla campaigns and the terrorism of today. As warfare and the nature of threats changed, Australia's defence structure – and particularly the role and scope of special elements in that structure – has also changed.

Under the Defence Act 1901, all males 18 to 60 were liable for compulsory military service for the home defence of Australia. Because of the 'home' restriction, Australia raised a volunteer force to serve overseas when it entered World War 1. This force, which earned fame as the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), consisted of five infantry divisions serving in France plus Light Horse and other mounted formations in the Middle East.

In World War II, Australia again raised a volunteer expeditionary force, the 2nd AIF, of four infantry divisions, an armoured division and various army and corps units.

Start of 'independents' for Australia

With the four AIF infantry divisions deployed overseas in the Middle East and the-then Malaya, the main task of the Army within Australia in 1940/41 was providing reinforcements. In this climate a British military mission, headed by Lt. Col. Mawhood, came to Australia in 1940, and prompted a decision to raise independent companies.

Britain had recently introduced special units, much smaller than an infantry battalion and highly trained in raiding techniques, sabotage operations and conducting guerrilla warfare. They could operate for extended periods in an isolated role without normal lines of communication. Hence the name "independent".

After the Dunkirk evacuation and the fall of France, the only British option for offensive action was amphibious raids across the English Channel into German-occupied Europe. British Army commandos came into being.

No. 7 Infantry Training Centre

In Australia, No. 7 Infantry Training Centre was established at Wilsons Promontory in February 1941 because of the rugged terrain and its remoteness from habitation for secrecy reasons. Volunteers were called for from all members of the AIF in Australia, that is 1st Armoured Division and AIF reinforcements.

The terms "special operations" and "special forces" weren't then in vogue, so volunteers were simply told there would be special duty in units requiring high physical fitness where a higher than normal danger was involved. All who joined independent companies were



Above: No. 7 Infantry Training Centre, Wilsons Promontory.



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Reserve Commandos inherit a remarkable legacy (continued)

twice volunteers, once for the AIF and once again for special duty.

"No 7 Infantry Training Centre" was a cover to disguise the nature of training and the units formed. At the time the Australian Army was organised on a state basis: independent companies were also unique because members came from all states. The 1, 2 and 3 Independent Companies and two NZ companies were formed during 1941 and a fourth was training when management decided no further units were required and that 4 Independent Company should return to their previous units.

Japan's entry into the war on 7 December 1941 changed opinions dramatically. The 4th Independent Company re-formed and completed its training, and further units were raised. The 1940s training at Wilsons Promontory established a model for all training since. Training and terrain were part of the selection process. All volunteers were interviewed personally to establish motivation and aptitude, but it was recognised the interview could provide only a rough guide to someone's suitability.

One of the first tests at the Promontory (although not announced as such) was for new arrivals to climb the 558 metres to the top of Mt Oberon. Those who did not reach the top found transport waiting back at camp to return them immediately to their previous units.

During all training, there was great emphasis on physical fitness and endurance. All ranks schooled in demolitions and sabotage, night movement and operations, and infantry minor tactics with emphasis on patrolling and the setting of ambushes, as well as scouting, weapon training and being able to operate solo or in small parties. Training encouraged personal initiative.

WW2: Independent Company operations

There were initially eight "independent" companies:

- 1st Independent Company
- 2/2 Independent Company
- 2/3 Independent Company
- 2/4 Independent Company
- 2/5 Independent Company
- 2/6 Independent Company
- 2/7 Independent Company
- 2/8 Independent Company

All undertook remarkable feats – we have room here to highlight just a few:

2/2 Independent Company

The Australian Government, under a treaty with the Dutch, deployed Sparrow force to Kupang in then-Dutch Timor. The force comprised 2/40 Australian Infantry Battalion AIF, a heavy artillery unit and 2/2 Independent Company AIF.



Above: Soldiers from the 1st Independent Company in Kavieng during WW2 (photo courtesy Arthur Littler MM)

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At Kupang, 2/2 Company refused to surrender when the Japanese over-ran the area, and withdrew into the hills to wage guerilla warfare lasting some 12 months. It was estimated that they tied down 20,000 Japanese troops in Timor who could have had a major impact if used elsewhere.

2/2 Coy was withdrawn from Timor at the end of 1942 and replaced by the 2/4 Coy. 2/2 Coy was redesignated 2/2 Commando Squadron AIF and was one of only two Commando squadrons which continued to operate in an independent role, not as part of a regimental structure, until the end of the war. It participated in two further campaigns in mainland New Guinea and New Britain. At the end of hostilities, 2/2 Squadron could claim to have spent longer in contact with the enemy than any other unit of the Australian Army.

2/5 Independent Company

The unit formed officially in March 1942 and embarked at Townsville for Port Moresby on 13 April 1942. On 23 May 1942, the unit was flown to Wau in a mixture of US Army Air Corps C47 troop transport and Australian civil airliners, making history by becoming the first Australian Army unit to fly to battle stations.

The anti-tank platoon of 23 Australian Infantry Brigade AIF had joined 2/5 Company in Port Moresby as a mortar platoon and, on arrival in Wau, 2/5 Company was further reinforced by a platoon of reinforcements for 1st Independent Company sent to the area after the 1st Company had been overrun.

There were also a number of members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR), a local militia unit, in the area. The whole force was known as Kanga Force. From the outset, 2/5 Company dispersed over a very wide area: it was almost 10 months before many saw each other again.

On the night of 28/29 June 1942, a mixed force of 2/5 Company and NGVR raided Japanese installations at Salamau, a town which with Lae, formed the main Japanese base in New Guinea at the time. Surprise was complete – an estimated 100 Japanese were killed and equipment and intelligence documents captured. The raid was the first offensive action by Allied land forces in the entire Pacific War.

Kanga Force was reinforced by 2/7 Independent Company in October 1942. On 11 January 1943, 2/5 Company, less elements operating in the Markham Valley, and 2/7 Company raided the major Japanese outpost at Mubo. This operation was undoubtedly the largest raid of the war.

2/7 Independent Company

2/7 Company arrived at Port Moresby on 4 October 1942 and almost immediately emplaned for Wau where they joined 2/5 Company in Kanga Force.

2/7 Company withdrew from Wau in May 1943 to Port Moresby and then flew into Bena Bena, inland from coastal Madang, to deny the Japanese the Bena Bena airfield. Bena Bena was strategically located between the Finisterre and Bismark Ranges, with access to the Markham and Ramu Valleys. 2/2 Company also moved into the area in July 1943 and, under supervision of the engineer sections of the two units, Goroka airfield began to take shape. It still exists today.

The style of warfare again changed 'shape' as fighting forced the Japanese into retreat. This time, the mainstream AIF divisions adapted by way of new roles for their cavalry regiments.

The Cavalry (Commando) Regiment

Each original 2nd AIF infantry division had a mounted (in vehicles) cavalry regiment, with the traditional role of reconnaissance, flank protection for larger formations, and taking and holding ground against light opposition. The nature and terrain of the Pacific War meant they could not adopt their traditional roles.

The Australian media frequently referred to independent companies as "commandos", a term the companies did not like. Most felt proud of their exploits in independent guerrilla operations, but they thought "commando" belonged to the British commandos operating in Europe. However, in late 1943, Army HQ decided to amalgamate the divisional cavalry regiments and the independent companies and redesignate them "Independent Companies". The title initially was "Cavalry (Commando) Squadron" but this soon changed to "Commando Squadron" and only the regimental headquarters retained the full title of "Cavalry (Commando) Regiment". The HQ had no operational role.

Increasingly, the independent companies were used as part of the divisional structure for reconnaissance, flank protection, the securing of important tactical features and the like – in other words, similarly to the traditional role of cavalry and the tasks given to Commando Squadrons.

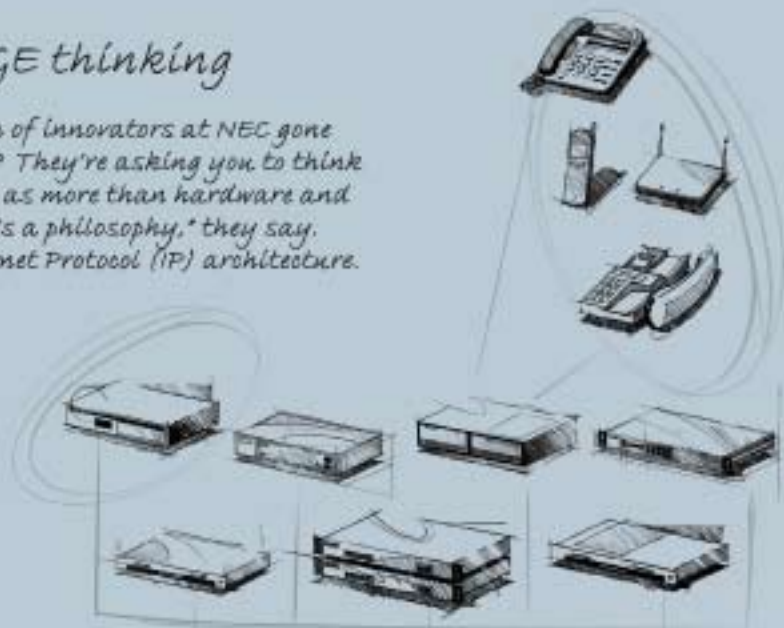
By the end of 1943, the new structure was:

- 2/6 Cavalry (Commando) Regiment comprising:
 - 2/7 Commando Squadron formerly 2/7 Independent Company and
 - 2/9 and 2/10 Commando Squadrons, formed from members of 2/6 Cavalry Regt and new volunteers.

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- 2/7 Cavalry (Commando) Regiment comprising
 - 2/3, 2/5 and 2/6 Commando Squadrons (formerly 2/3, 2/5 and 2/6 Independent Companies)
- 2/9 Cavalry (Commando) Regiment comprising:
 - 2/4 Commando Squadron (formerly 2/4 Independent Company) together with
 - 2/11 and 2/12 Commando Squadrons formed from members of 2/9 Cavalry Regiment and new volunteers.

2/2 and 2/8 Commando Squadrons continued to operate independently until the war ended.

2/9 and 2/10 Commando Squadron AIF

These two units formed from volunteers from 2/6 Cavalry Regiment plus reinforcements. With 2/9 Commando Squadron they formed 2/6 Cavalry (Commando) Regiment.

2/11 and 2/12 Commando Squadrons

With 2/4 Commando Squadron, these two units formed from 2/9 Cavalry Regiment made up 2/9 Cavalry (Commando) Regiment. Both units participated in the 9th Australian Division campaign in North Borneo.

‘M’ and ‘Z’ Special Units

Before WW2, anticipating war with Japan, Australian intelligence and the Royal Australian Navy arranged for individuals to "stay-behind" after Japan captured territory in what was to become the South West Pacific Area (SWPA).

The forecast scenario proved remarkably accurate and the people became known as the "coast watchers". They performed invaluable service by reporting Japanese naval and air movements and providing early warning to Allied installations of impending attack.

As the war progressed there was an increasing need for accurate intelligence about the enemy and local geography to plan future operations. Also, despite the Japanese "Greater Asia Co-prosperity Scheme", there was strong support for the Allies in most occupied countries, so that active resistance by local populations became possible.

Europe had provided the example. There the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and later the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS – later to become the CIA) organised resistance in occupied countries using specially-trained people to co-ordinate operations and conduct sabotage and other activities. In the Pacific, early in 1942 an offshoot of SOE was

created, to be known as SOA (Special Operations Australia) with the cover title of Inter Allied Services Department (IASD), usually abbreviated to ISD. In March 1943, ISD re-formed as the Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD). A holding unit specifically created in June 1942, called 'Z Special Unit', administered all Australian personnel in SRD.

The Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) was also formed in June 1942 by GHQ SWPA to control and co-ordinate the activities of the various "cloak and dagger" organisations that mushroomed during that period. From all this developed "M Special Unit" and "Z Special Unit".

In broad terms, "M" collected intelligence by sending small parties behind enemy lines using whatever was available – submarines, aircraft and surface craft.

For "Z", collecting intelligence was an incidental by-product (but an important one) of their operations. The main aim of "Z" was sending trained parties behind enemy lines to conduct operations themselves, or to organise and lead local inhabitants in active resistance.



Above: Arthur Littler from the 1st Independent Company with a Vickers machine gun in Kavieng during WW2 (photo courtesy Arthur Littler MM).



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Reserve Commandos inherit a remarkable legacy (continued)

The two seaborne raids on Singapore in 1943 and 1944 known as Jaywick and Rimau are the best-known examples of conducting operations themselves, while SRD activities in Borneo's interior before and during the Australian landings provide evidence of helping locals to resist.

Between 1942 and August 1945, ISD / SRD sent 81 parties to Japanese-occupied territories. Their casualties were 69 dead and missing.

The almost classic special operations conducted in Borneo undoubtedly killed more Japanese than did the conventional operations of 7th and 9th Australian divisions. Also, the Japanese were so discomfited by the threat to their rear that expected counter attacks against 7th and 9th divisions never materialised.

Attitudes within the Australian Army

Despite the success of independent companies, mainstream AIF divisions held a very conservative view of them. The general attitude by commanders at all levels was: "If they move on foot, they're infantry and they should behave as such."

It was unfortunate that quite often the first meeting between the independent companies and infantry battalions came after the independent companies had been operating in a guerrilla role for long periods with no supply lines. They were bearded (no razors or razor blades), their clothing was ragged and untidy (replacements were a rarity) and they gave a general impression of scruffiness.



Above: From the history files, Lieutenant Tony Harman of 126 Signal Squadron, then part of 1Cdo Regt, is seen on exercise in Tasmania. Sigs units have always been a vital part of the Commando capability - photo courtesy Defence PR and Tony Harman.

After WW2**The formation of Commando Companies**

After WW2, planners recognised that the people of occupied countries might need help from highly-trained operatives to organise and coordinate resistance activities – but all the specially-raised organizations, such as SOE and OSS and M and Z Special Units, had been disbanded.

In Australia in the early 1950s defence planners convinced the government to raise "Special Forces" for clandestine operations similar to those of Z Special Unit and of the Independent Companies and Commando Squadrons during the war. Units capable of performing a dual role would provide a pool of trained manpower to be "farmed off" as needed to an equivalent of Z Special Unit, while the rest would undertake more conventional commando operations.

In November 1954, Army Headquarters issued instructions for the raising of 1 Commando Company in Sydney and 2 Commando Company in Melbourne. The establishment rules and equipment for both units were identical to those of the wartime commando squadrons.

For manpower reasons (and also because some thought regular soldiers were not best suited to unconventional operations), it was decided the new units should be part of the Citizen Military Forces (CMF), the equivalent of today's Army Reserve. 2 Commando Company, in Melbourne, formed on February 24, 1955, with 1 Commando Company, in Sydney, formed on June 25, 1955.

However, the scope and nature of the training involved made it impossible for a CMF officer to command such a unit, so regular commanding officers were appointed. With time, the size of the regular cadre has been considerably increased.

Fortunately, the British had retained the Royal Marine Commando Brigade and the Special Air Service Regiment, with both a regular and territorial (equivalent to Army Reserve) component. Both the Marine Commandos and the SAS had expertise in special operations vastly superior to anything available in Australia. The OC and training warrant officers of both 1 and 2 Commando Companies were attached to the Royal Marines in the UK for six months specialist training, an arrangement which continued for many years.

In the early days, there was no clear-cut operational role for the two companies. This did not cause undue concern as the same could be said for the Australian armed forces in general. Commando communications support was