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The enemy within

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Abstract
As the Anzac commemoration industry, awash with millions of dollars of government and corporate investment, gears up to celebrate the centenary of the Gallipoli landing in 2015 (embracing in the process all Australian military adventures overseas going back to involvement in the New Zealand Maori Wars of 1863–64), and the Sudan intervention of 1885), it is salutary to reflect on a seldom discussed Australian military tradition closer to home – in fact, at home.

Simply, military might in Australia has, since early colonial days, been deployed on the home front. Forget the ‘feel good’ domestic use of military forces in times of cyclone, fire, flood, drought as aid and logistic adjuncts, and think instead of the political, the ‘otherness’ of Australia’s martial tradition. Just as the Anzac spirit embraces nineteenth century colonial conflicts before the Federation of Australia in 1901, so too does the domestic ‘otherness’.

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The ‘otherness’ begins with colonisation. European occupation of the continent did not go unchallenged by the Aboriginal peoples. A state of war existed from Governor Phillip’s time right through to the nineteenth century, as the invaders met with Aboriginal resistance. The defenders strategically employed guerrilla warfare against the superior military might of industrial Britain. Because this resistance was effective, and the enemy elusive, a bloody and vengeful military campaign was conducted in retaliation. There were punitive raids on indigenous camps, and terror was officially used to bring about submission. It was a protracted warfare that resulted in an estimated 20,000 Aboriginal deaths and 2000 European deaths.

For twenty years between 1790 and 1810, Britain was preoccupied with conflict in Europe. The colonial outpost of New South Wales was turned over to a specially created infantry force, the NSW Corps. Recruited from adventurists, opportunists and Britain’s military prisons, the outfit virtually had a free hand. As the use and supply of much-sought-after liquor became monopolistically linked with the Corps’ administration of the colony, the term ‘The Rum Corps’ was attached to the regime, at once marking the corruption of the outfit while simultaneously trivialising it. The Corps’ officer elite in reality constituted a military junta, and used its monopoly on weapons to self-advantage. The small non-convict population was cowed into submission, and the clique used thuggish corruption to generate personal fortunes, especially in land deals.

Anti-labour initiatives

Skip decades closer to Federation, with new players, and great industrial unrest. During the 1890 intercolonial Maritime Strike, Colonel Tom Price addressed one thousand military volunteers in Melbourne, organised to control/intimidate a planned public meeting in support of strikers. Price told his men to preserve ‘law and order’ at all costs, and with the forty rounds of ammunition specifically issued to each volunteer, teach the crowd a lesson if necessary, sanctioning bloodshed with the chilling instruction to ‘Fire low and lay them out’. The Price solution established an Australian martial tradition.

In 1923, the armed forces were mobilised as back-up during the Melbourne Police Strike and also provided strike-breaking assistance; troops were used as strike breakers during the 1949 Coal Strike in New South Wales; army and naval personnel were used to variously break bans by the Seamen’s Union of Australia (SUA) and the Waterside Workers’ Federation in 1951, 1952, 1953, and 1954; the navy was used to break an SUA boycott against the Vietnam War in 1967; the air force was used to break union bans on Qantas in 1981; the navy and air force were used to break the 1989 industrial campaign by the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. Also that year, the dispatch of troops was authorised to back-up South Australian police against demonstrators at the Nurrungar joint Australia-United States military satellite base.
Significant anti-civilian deployment of Australia’s armed forces was planned under Operation Alien during the Cold War. In late 1950, under the control of Prime Minister Menzies, detailed plans were drawn up to counter industrial actions in Australia’s coal mines, on its waterfronts, and on merchant shipping, by variously deploying the Army, Navy, and Air Force. During the 1951 Referendum to ban the Communist Party, Army Commands were placed on alert.

At the Bonegilla reception camp in Victoria, 1952, armoured cars and troops were used to intimidate agitated unemployed Italian migrants. The nature and extent of involvement of defence force personnel in the 1998 War on the Waterfront is yet to be fully understood; the anti-union mercenary workforce, recruited to confront and end union power on Australia’s waterfronts, was initially recruited from serving military personnel via advertisements in the army newspaper Army, the recruiters including former military personnel.

Secret armies and internment

Indeed, Australian conservative governments and the capitalist state have long had backers and supporters within the shadows of the military ‘otherness’. Private quasi-military outfits proliferated during the 1920s and 1930s, drawing on ex-service personnel. Some of these organisations were the Order of Silent Knights, the Blackshirts, the White Guard, the Old Guard, the New Guard, the League of National Security. Together, they had an estimated membership of 130,000. As I pointed out in a previous Overland article, these outfits had access to arms and ammunition, were disciplined, conspiratorial, well-organised and financed, and had significant links with serving, often high ranking, military personnel. Distrustful of democratic processes and conventions, hostile towards organised labour, they waited in the wings for the opportunity to impose authoritarian solutions. The last known of these outfits was The Association, led by Sir Thomas Blamey, Major General C.H. Simpson, and General Sir Leslie Morshead. Organised in 1947, it disbanded in the early 1950s, welcoming the strong anti-communist and anti-union policies of the newly elected Menzies government.

During the Cold War, and running from 1950 through to the early 1970s, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Military Intelligence planned the internment of Australian leftists and other perceived ‘security risks’ should a national emergency need arise. The internees were to be accommodated in camps built and policed by the Army. Lists were drawn up and regularly revised, with the number of internees blowing out to some 11000, including spouses and children. The plan was eventually abandoned when the project became unmanageably large and political change was in the air.

Martial law

The domestic military adventurism that really takes the cake was the Fraser government’s military occupation of the semi-rural town of Bowral south of Sydney, during the commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM) in 1978. This followed a mysterious bomb explosion in a garbage bin outside the CHOGRM venue, the Hilton Hotel. Possibly the result of a botched black operation by Australia’s security agencies, the early morning explosion killed two garbage collectors; a policeman later died of injuries, and seven other people were seriously injured. In response, Prime Minister Fraser deployed nearly 2000 troops to act against the unseen, never identified or described and possibly fictitious ‘terrorist’ threat. The Bowral township was occupied and placed under an undeclared, implied, form of martial law for a couple of days during a subsequent CHOGRM rural retreat.

This unprecedented decision, along with the bombing itself, had significant ramifications. Security was placed firmly on Australia’s national agenda and fundamentally changed the nation. The power of the federal government in domestic affairs was strengthened, terrorism became a specific legal entity, counter-terrorism became the preserve of the army, and eventually we got the Defence Legislation Amendment (Aid to Civilian Authorities) Act 2000, which made it easier for the federal government
to use the armed forces in peace-time on domestic soil against perceived threats to Commonwealth interests, and enabled the army to have police powers.

The message is clear. From colonial military actions against the Aboriginal peoples to the 1978 martial occupation of Bowral, there is a dark side to Australia’s military record, an ‘otherness’. Within this resides an enemy of the Australian people.

Rowan Cahill is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong, and blogs at http://www.radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au.