



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Snapshot of Australia's Wartime and Peacekeeping History

Boer War 1899 -1902

As part of the British Empire, each of the Australian colonies offered troops for the war in South Africa, also known as the Second Anglo-Boer War. At least 16,000 Australians served in Australian colonial contingents, or from 1901, in units raised by the new Australian Commonwealth. Many more joined British or South African colonial units in South Africa. Australians served mostly in mounted units, often known as mounted rifles, bushmen, or imperial bushmen. They fought in both the British counter-offensive of 1900, which resulted in the capture of the Boer capitals, and in the long, weary guerrilla phases of the war lasting until the end of the war in 1902. Colonial troops were valued for their ability to "shoot and ride", and they performed well in the open war on the veldt.

First World War 1914–1918

In August 1914, Australia, as a British dominion, joined Britain in the war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Between 1914 and 1918 over 320,000 Australian men and women served overseas in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and some in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). The best remembered aspect of Australia's participation in the 'Great War' is undoubtedly Gallipoli, where in 1915 the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps became a household name. After Gallipoli, most of the AIF went to fight in France and Belgium (the Western Front) where over 45,000 Australians lost their lives. In the Middle East the Australian Light Horse fought against the Turks between 1916 and 1918. Three squadrons of the Australian Flying Corps also served on the Western Front, and another flew in the Middle East. The RAN provided warships for convoy escorts, anti-submarine operations and participated in the blockade of Germany.

Second World War 1939–1945

When Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, Australia again rallied to support Britain. During the war, Australian Army, Navy and Air Force personnel served in Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean, and later in Malaya and the islands to Australia's north. Australia also had to defend its own territory against Japanese attack in 1942 and 1943 when towns across northern Australia, such as Darwin, were bombed and merchant ships were sunk around the coast. Throughout the war the RAN escorted merchant marine convoys and participated in naval actions in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. RAN personnel also served with the Royal Navy. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) sent thousands of airmen to serve with the Royal Air Force in Europe and the Mediterranean as well as fighting in the war in the Pacific. Australian women saw significant wartime service both on the home front and in the women's services in Australia and overseas.

Korean War 1950–1953

In 1950 Australian servicemen and women joined a United Nations (UN) force to support South Korea after a North Korean invasion. After initial North Korean success their forces were pushed back but, in October 1950, China intervened and drove the UN armies south. A stalemate developed, which lasted until July 1953 when an armistice was signed ending the fighting. A final agreement - a peace treaty - has yet to be signed. The Australian Army, RAN and RAAF all fought in Korea.

Malayan Emergency 1948–1960

In 1950, Australian forces were sent to Malaya when the British government called for assistance to resist a communist insurgency that had begun in 1948. Australia's small military involvement in the Malayan Emergency lasted until 1960.

Vietnam War 1962–1975

In 1962, Australia became involved in the Vietnam War. At first, Australian advisers were sent to South Vietnam to help train the South Vietnamese army in their fight against North Vietnamese-backed communist insurgents. Over time, further forces were committed to aid the South Vietnamese and American forces in direct conflict against the armies of the local Viet Cong and North Vietnam. Australia's main commitment to the Vietnam War included elements of the Australian Army, RAN and RAAF as well as service nurses.

Indonesian Confrontation 1963–1966

The Indonesian Confrontation was the name given to the Indonesian attempt to foil the British move to establish a Federation of Malaysia in the early 1960s. In response to a developing 'low level war' and to British requests, Australia (which already had forces based on the Malayan Peninsula) sent ground troops to Borneo in 1965. RAN ships patrolled coastal waters while RAAF aircraft were also involved. Confrontation ended in 1966 after Indonesia and Malaysia signed a peace treaty.

First Gulf War 1991

Following the Iraqi invasion of neighbouring Kuwait in 1990, the United Nations approved trade sanctions against Iraq. A multinational force, including elements of the RAN, was deployed in the Persian Gulf to enforce this trade embargo while ground forces were assembled in Saudi Arabia. A few RAAF and Army personnel, including medical teams, also served. In early 1991, Iraq was bombed and invaded to drive that country's forces out of Kuwait. The war ended successfully for the multinational force in late February 1991.

Afghanistan & Iraq 2001–present

Australia joined a United States-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC. Personnel from each of the Australian services served in Afghanistan over the years to 2014, mostly in counter-insurgency, training and reconstruction roles. In 2003 Australia also participated in a 'Coalition of the Willing' invasion of Iraq having alleged that the regime of President Saddam Hussein was concealing weapons of mass destruction and had links with terrorist groups. Aerial bombing of Iraqi cities preceded a swift advance to Baghdad and the overthrow of the Hussein regime. Australian naval forces patrolled the Persian Gulf, enforcing an economic blockade, screening United States carrier groups, patrolling and carrying out anti-mine activities. The Army provided special forces units during the invasion phase and Australian troops were later involved in patrolling, training and reconstruction. Royal Australian Air Force personnel provided combat and logistics support throughout the war.

Peace operations 1947–present

Australia has been involved in United Nations and other multi-national peacekeeping and peacemaking operations since 1947. These activities have included providing support for democratic elections, military observation, monitoring cease-fires, clearing landmines, humanitarian aid and the repatriation of refugees. In September 1999, Australian forces were sent to East Timor as part of a UN force to provide security and restore peace. Australian Defence Force personnel are currently (2014) deployed on a number of peace-keeping operations in places as diverse as Egypt and South Sudan.