3 War and Society in Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania

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Introduction

Warfare in Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania covers thousands of years and countless generations. However, the long inhabitation of these island states largely escapes written records, and much of the oral history has dissipated with passing generations. Only since the time when European empires transgressed the region has evidence been more systematically gathered and analyzed to form a more complete understanding of the effects of war on these societies.

Though separate entities, these three areas are linked by geography and the impacts of colonization and empire. With a common history of settlement by the British Empire, New Zealand military history and Australian military history are invariably compared. In many respects, given the wars they fought for, and their corresponding places within the British Empire and Commonwealth, there is much to be gained by looking at these two countries in tandem. However, significant differences exist between New Zealand’s and Australia’s military experiences, and in particular how they have remembered and memorialized these conflicts. In contrast, while they are often perceived as conforming to similar patterns, experiences, scholarship, and interpretation, that of Oceania is seen as occupying the separate historical sphere of “Pacific history,” despite the deep involvement of both New Zealand and Australia in this region. This chapter charts the separate military histories of these three areas while identifying elements of commonality between them.

Australia

Within the broader Oceania region Australia is the largest country in terms of its size, population, and relative power. As a nation it has a short but remarkably eventful military history. While warfare on the Continent dates back thousands of years before European settlement in 1788, over the last century military events have been especially prominent. The Boer War, two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan, plus scores of peacekeeping and peace enforcement deployments and missions, have placed military conflict toward the center of Australia’s historical experience.

The centerpiece of Australian military history is the storming of the beaches at Anzac Cove on April 25, 1915. (ANZAC being the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. In modern parlance “ANZAC” refers to the military formation and “Anzac” to soldiers, a place, a national day, a myth, and a legend.) This event is seen as one of the defining points in the national story, and for many it is regarded as the birthplace of the nation. Debate over how the death and wounding of thousands of young Australian males gave “birth” to the country has, however, never been reconciled. But in the absence of a truly national day that unites the country, Anzac Day (part Remembrance Day, part 4th of July foundation day) has,
in recent decades, evolved into a spiritually important day of national significance focused on remembrance and sacrifice—one that evokes what some have called the civic religion of Anzac. Key works on the notion of “Anzac” and its influence on Australian society can be found in two excellent studies by Graham Seal (2004) and Carolyn Holbrook (2014).

Before the events at Gallipoli seared themselves into the Australian consciousness, the nation already had a long experience at war. One of the most controversial aspects of Australian history is the notion of the conflict on the “frontiers” between European settlers and Aboriginal Australia. This debate has been mainly fought out between historians of Indigenous Australia, most prominently Henry Reynolds (1987), Richard Broome (1994), Lyndall Ryan (1997), and the controversial Keith Windschuttle (2002); Attwood and Foster (2003) offer the best summary of the differing views and core debates. This discourse was also a microcosm of the so-called history wars in Australia, which, at the time, saw a highly politicized use of the discipline centered on the debate between “black armband” (focused on the history of indigenous society and minorities) and “white blindfold” (focused on the white Anglo–Saxon history of Australia and often rejecting the notion of dispossession and violence against indigenous communities) versions of Australian history. Among more strategic and operationally focused “traditional” military historians, the notion of war on the Australian colonial frontier has been widely accepted for some time, with the best account being John Connor’s excellent 2002 study. This period is also very well covered in Jeffery Grey’s chapters on the frontier conflicts in his widely read and cited A Military History of Australia (2008b), now in its third edition.

The British colonies in Australia next experienced war through a series of small colonial conflicts across the British Empire, including the Māori Wars, Sudan War, Boxer Rebellion, and the Boer War. These conflicts are well covered in Craig Stockings and John Connor’s edited collection (2013). The story of the Australian officer Harry “Breaker” Morant and the controversy surrounding his execution by the British military in South Africa in 1902 is the most controversial element of this period, and it has dominated much of the scholarship on Australia’s involvement in the Boer War. The case in support of Morant has been put by popular historian Nick Bleszynski (2003) and countered (among other authors) by Craig Wilcox (2002). Wilcox’s volume, a product of an Australian War Memorial project, provides a detailed coverage of Australia’s involvement in the war and acts as a pseudo–official history in the absence of one being commissioned by the Australian government.

Despite numerous military operations before 1914, the First World War established the role and place of military history in Australia, as well as historiographical elements that still dominate the field today. As noted, the landing at Anzac Cove by the I ANZAC Corps (made up of the 1st Australian Division and the New Zealand Division) was the pivotal event in Australian military history from which all subsequent history has evolved. The Anzac legend was largely fostered by C.E.W. Bean, chosen in 1914 as the official war correspondent and later appointed as the official war historian. Bean edited the fifteen volumes of the official history, Australia in the War of 1914–1918 (1921–1942), and wrote the six volumes covering the operations at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. In a somewhat radical move for the time, Bean’s history was written largely from the viewpoint of the regimental experience as opposed to a focus on the events at headquarters and on strategy. This focus on the soldiers fostered what has been called a “democratic” war history tradition, which has had a profound effect on the writing of military history in Australia. This approach continues to dominate most of the works that have been published on Australians’ war experience up to and including today.

Bean inspired a long tradition of journalists writing Australia’s military history. Heavily focused on the “diggers” (slang for an Australian soldier that evolved on the Western Front), it has evolved into a form of writing that the historian Robert Stevenson has called
“diggerography”: one that encapsulates a populist approach reflecting the notion that a good story is more important than good history. Such works, covering all of Australia’s major conflicts, are often large in size and heavily reliant on oral histories of aging veterans. They also tend to be short on archival evidence and analysis. Another key feature is their focus on the supposed incompetence of the high command, especially if these officers are provided by Australia’s “great and powerful friends” Great Britain or the United States.

Diggerography-styled books remain highly popular among the general public. They are also often the favorite of nationalist politicians, with Les Carlyon’s (an award-winning sport journalist) *The Great War* being the co-inaugural winner of the Prime Minister’s Award for Australian History in 2007. Unfortunately, the quality of these popular military histories remains mixed, with most falling well short of demonstrating solid historical knowledge and use of evidence. While this trend is replicated in many other countries, such as Great Britain and the United States, Australia lacks high-quality journalist-historians, like Anthony Beevor, Max Hastings, and Rick Atkinson. Furthermore, few Australian scholars have produced works of a similar focus, contributing to a chasm between the small number of historians in the academy and the larger numbers writing from outside of it.

This separation also reflects the academy’s rejection of “traditional” military history (focused on strategy, campaigns, operations, tactics, leadership and command, doctrine, etc.) that began with the mass expansion of university education in Australia coinciding with the Vietnam War. As Professor Joan Beaumont, one of the country’s leading historians of war, argues, the majority of academics came to see war as a “morally suspect activity.” As a result of this factor, along with the corresponding culturalist turn in the humanities, and the “leftist traditions of . . . Australian intellectual life” (Beaumont, 2003, 166), when the academy has looked at war it has done so from the perspective of war and society, with a focus on the social effects of war, including the rise of memory studies, commemoration, and pilgrimage.

This war and society approach has provided fertile ground in Australian military history. One of the key factors has been the prevalence in twentieth-century Australia of largely fighting wars in distant places (mostly in Europe and the Middle East and remote parts of Asia-Pacific). This factor, coupled with the decision to not repatriate the remains of Australian soldiers, sailors, airmen, and nurses from the two world wars, coupled with the strong notions around the Anzac mythology, has given rise to a strong collection of work on war, memory, grief, and pilgrimage. In this the First World War has continued to dominate, with works written by Bart Ziino (2007), Tanja Lukins (2004), and Bruce Scates (2006) serving as key texts. The Second World War has also been well served in this field by the likes of Liz Reed (2004) and, again, Bruce Scates (2013). Operating at the intersection of military history, the Anzac legend, and war and memory has been the importance of the POW experience in Australia. Driven largely by the thousands of Australians who went into captivity at the hands of the Japanese during the Pacific war, this field has seen some excellent studies, notably by Hank Nelson (1985) and Joan Beaumont (1988). The best overview of the POW experience across Australia’s wars can be found in Joan Beaumont et al. (2015). Overall the losses that occurred during the world wars had a profound effect on Australian society, and this is captured most prominently in the claim that Australia has the highest number (per capita) of war memorials of any country on earth. This is exemplified by the national Australian War Memorial in Canberra established by Charles Bean that serves as a shrine, museum, memorial, and research center. The importance of these memorials is captured brilliantly in Ken Inglis’ multi-award-winning *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (1998).

The debate over Bean’s influence and the role of military history in Australian society, as well as within the discipline, continues to court controversy. For many, the Anzac legend has been co-opted and exploited by the state in particular, but also by nationalist elements
and right-wing politics. In 2010 four prominent academic historians produced *What’s Wrong With Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History* (2010). The book represents a long overdue critique of the legend, and it displayed considerable courage given the sacredness that Anzac had achieved among large sections of Australian society. Its basic premise is that Anzac has overshadowed other (more) important elements of the national story, such as federation and labor history, and is particularly exclusive of women and the multicultural nature of Australian society. However, this legitimate argument was weakened by some poor sections of the work surrounding the publishing of military history in Australia and overseas, a lack of knowledge on strategy and operations, and a misinterpretation of Anzac as an extension of militarism and imperialism. James Brown has written a much more effective, recent critique (2014). A defense analyst, former army officer, and veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, Brown deconstructs how Anzac has been traded on by companies and associations and how it limits criticism of the Australian Defence Force.

Another of Bean’s legacies has been the role and importance of official histories to Australia. Following up on his epic, another journalist, Gavin Long, was appointed and produced a twenty-two-volume history of *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*. In the post–World War II era, however, the official historians have all come from the academy, and a number of them, including Professors Robert O’Neill, David Horner, and Craig Stockings, are also former military officers and veterans. Each of these series, covering the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, peacekeeping and Cold War operations, and a newly commissioned (2016) series on East Timor, Iraq, and Afghanistan have evolved considerably from Bean’s time to include more detailed coverage of diplomacy and strategy as well as operations, services, and the home front. The enduring foundations for the Australian tradition in official histories is that they have access to official records, that they tell the national story, and that they are written independent of government with control only over the preservation of classified technical secrets. They remain the standard reference volumes for their conflicts and the starting points for any serious researcher.

Besides official histories there have been a number of government- or service-sponsored publications, the two most important being the seven-volume *Australian Centenary History of Defence* (2001). This series has a volume on the history of all three services and is especially notable for the first history of the Department of Defence, Professor Joan Beaumont’s excellent *Australians Defence: Sources and Statistics*, and Lieutenant General John Coates’ superb *An Atlas of Australia’s Wars*, now in its second edition. Most recently Professor Jeffery Grey (2015–2016) was series editor of the five-volume *The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War*. This series brings to light the best of recent scholarship in Australia on the First World War, with volumes covering the air war, the war with the Germans, the home front, and a history of the Australian Imperial Force. In tandem with this production is the Royal Australian Navy’s comprehensive century volume, *In All Respects Ready*, produced by the nation’s leading naval historian, David Stevens. Of note here is also the excellent and broad sweeping *Oxford Companion to Australian Military History* (2008).

Biography has also proven fertile ground for military history, particularly in the last three decades. In a comprehensive overview of this genre, Peter Dean (2011) notes that virtually all of Australia’s major army commanders have been the recipient of at least one biography, as have many of the Victoria Cross winners. Most of the more recent biographies have been produced by professionally trained historians. However, there has been a plethora of populist studies on General Sir John Monash, commander of the Australian Corps in 1918, all of which offer little if any new historical insight and most of which delve the depths of hagiography and “diggerography.” The best biographies remain two of the originals by Geoffrey Serle (1982) and Peter Pederson (1985). Australia’s most senior military officer (and one of its most controversial), Field Marshall Thomas Blamey, has also been the subject of a number of studies, the most significant being David Horner’s excellent and balanced account (1998).
The Australian Army has dominated the genre of Australian military history, both in the number of volumes and the focus on its battles. These studies have also been particularly well served by investments from the institution in the Australian Army History Series. This includes an excellent academic series, first with Oxford, and then with Cambridge University Press, that accounts for most of the high-quality biographies and battle, campaign, and other studies produced over the last twenty years. The other two services have also been well supported through the navy’s Sea Power Centre and the Air Power Centre, whose publications mostly appear in electronic form on their websites.

In terms of specific conflicts, the history of the First World War dominates. Among the overwhelming number of titles a few volumes stand out, including the *Centenary History of the Great War* and Jean Bou’s two important works (2009 and 2016). The Second World War is the next most prominent, given its size and scope. Besides the texts already mentioned a number stand out for their approach or coverage, or the quality of the analysis. The absence of a volume on strategy in the Second World War official history is striking, especially given Australia’s role in the Pacific war; however, David Horner, Australia’s preeminent and most prolific military historian, produced a comprehensive study in 1982, filling this gap with *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939–1945*. Peter Stanley’s three works (1997; 2002, with Mark Johnston; and 2008) demonstrate some of the best analysis, whereas Peter Dean’s series of edited books on the Pacific war (2013; 2014; 2016) have been praised for their insight and coverage, combining battlefront analysis across all three services along with the home front, the POW experience, and perspectives from the United States and the Japanese. In the postwar period no texts have as yet gone far beyond the records and synthesis of the official histories, and few texts have yet to appear covering Australia’s more recent conflicts in the Middle East—although recent notable editions include Peter Edward’s synthesis of the Vietnam War official histories (2014).

Overall, while there has been much written on Australian military history, the gaps in the literature are still large. Across thematic approaches and conflicts, even with the much historically fought-over First World War, particularly the Gallipoli campaign, there is still plenty left to be covered. Other battles, operations, and campaigns still lack any or adequate coverage, and across the scope of conflict technical military history and logistics are very rarely addressed. Australian military history tends to be empirical and narrative-driven and has, more often than not, eschewed theory. This leaves fertile ground for current and future generations of historians to explore.

Furthermore, there still remains a large divide between those who work in more traditional military areas and those covering the “new military history” or war and society approaches. A few studies, such as Joan Beaumont’s award-winning First World War history (2013) and Michael McKernan’s integrated coverage of the Second World War (2008), bridge this divide, but it is all too rare in the historiography. As the late great Australian military historian Jeffery Grey has noted, “Perhaps it’s time Australian military historians on both sides of the divide [traditional military and social history of war] take a leaf from practice elsewhere” and started to work together to advance the field of study (Grey, 2008a, 468).

**New Zealand**

Military history in New Zealand has not occupied the same central place as it has in Australian historiography. While participating in similar conflicts, including war with indigenous peoples, the wars of Britain and the United States, peacekeeping, and the War on Terror, myriad gaps exist in New Zealand’s military history. Within the most comprehensive overview of New Zealand’s military history, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* (2000), Jeffrey Grey argues that relative to Māori history in particular, military history
has been “a minority interest” in New Zealand. Similarly, Deborah Montgomerie (2003, 62) argues that the history of New Zealand’s wars has been quarantined from social history, and connections between the two “are made only in passing, or treated as statements of historical verities rather than theses to be proved.” Montgomerie then explains that, although war is acknowledged as important in New Zealand’s history, “the details of the process . . . remain indistinct” (62).

With the exception of the history of the Māori people, and perhaps the First World War, the empirical and foundational detail of New Zealand’s wars is provided by an extensive official history program, which has received the greatest historiographical attention. Robert Rabel (2001) and McGibbon (2003), both official historians, argue that the “dominance” of official history is the result of a combination of factors, including the limited number of historians in a country of around four million, a more limited sense of nationalism than that found in Australia, and the focus of academic historical work on issues such as gender, culture, and race rather than more “traditional” areas of study, such as diplomatic and military history. Moreover, as Montgomerie argues, the nature of official histories has shaped the body of New Zealand war and social history. Funded by the government rather than universities, and writing for a general audience, authors are less likely to engage explicitly with historical debates, concentrating instead on narrative detail. While Rabel (2001, 64) decries the “unremitting empiricism” of the official histories, like in Australia, they do provide a solid foundation on which New Zealand military history rests.

Māori history and culture are central to New Zealand’s national identity, which marks a stark contrast with the place of indigenous peoples in Australia. In contrast to the literature on Australian frontier wars, conflict between and with Māori has received a significant proportion of military historians’ attentions. The reasons for this are complex, but reflect the higher proportion of the population made up by Māori, compared with Aboriginal Australians (around 15 and 2 percent respectively); a far stronger Māori political voice; and an early acceptance of Māori warfare as similar to Western conceptions of conflict. The Musket Wars offer a prime example of the latter point. Fought among Māori peoples between 1807 and 1845, their name incorporates the long-standing assumption that Western weapons, introduced by traders before the establishment of European colonies in New Zealand, changed the nature of Māori warfare. Angela Ballara (2003) has challenged this interpretation, arguing that these wars were an extension of previous modes of warfare, with muskets acting as a complementary tool rather than a catalyst for change.

European colonization in New Zealand saw the most sustained regular campaign against an indigenous people by imperial troops in the Pacific region. The most significant period of conflict occurred during the 1860s and 1870s, in what was known as the Māori Wars, now termed the New Zealand Wars. Early scholarship claimed they stemmed from land disputes in the new colony, and saw them as one of a series of colonial “land grabs.” James Cowen’s older two-volume work (1922–1923) remains a foundational text in its operational detail. Revisionist historians, of which James Belich (1987) is the most well-known, have argued that the conflict between Europeans and Māori was instead over sovereignty. While others have continued to revisit these conflicts, Belich’s work, which was also presented in a television documentary, sparked greater historical attention.

As throughout much of the British Commonwealth, the First World War has attracted the lion’s share of historical attention in New Zealand. While many nations lay claim to the title of “greatest sacrifice,” the sheer number of men sent overseas from New Zealand, relative to the population, was among the highest in the world. Following their return, there was a rush of publications on New Zealand’s war experience, particularly memoirs. The First World War also saw four volumes of official history published between 1921 and 1923, which covered the campaigns in Palestine, Turkey, and France. As McGibbon (2003)
points out in his introduction to the official histories of the First and Second World Wars, these volumes were managed within the military, written by officers for the general public. Although the volumes were commissioned without a great deal of coordination or general official enthusiasm, they have nonetheless dominated the historiography of New Zealand's First World War. Less formally, unit histories produced by veterans groups were overseen by a government committee.

With the centrality of the First World War to New Zealand history, and surges in scholarly and public interest during the 1980s and around the centenary, the First World War has been subject to the most rigorous reexamination by scholars of all New Zealand's wars. Christopher Pugsley's study of New Zealand's Gallipoli campaign (1984) marked one of the first since the official history. The depth of scholarship now being produced on New Zealand and the First World War is epitomized in John Crawford and Ian McGibbon's *New Zealand's Great War: New Zealand, the Allies and the First World War* (2007), in which an array of authors examine issues ranging from New Zealand and empire to repatriation, operations, gender, and community.

New Zealand's Second World War, despite the proximity of the Japanese advance into the Pacific, was focused on the Middle East and Europe. While Australia withdrew its divisions from the fight against Germany, the New Zealand 2nd Division remained in North Africa, and fought in Italy until the war's end. Although the 3rd Division fought limited campaigns in the Pacific, aided by air and naval units, the Mediterranean remained its principal effort. Writing on the Second World War continues to be dominated by the mammoth forty-eight volume official history (1949–1986). In some respects, the scale of this project was a reaction to the haphazard and uneven First World War official histories, and the project covers the entire breadth of New Zealand's wartime experience, including a volume devoted to prisoners of war. Rabel (2001) argues that the sheer scope of these histories has "daunted" historians, but there undoubtedly remain many more gaps to fill than for the First World War.

New Zealand's post–1945 conflicts were marked by small, niche contributions in support of the British, the United States, and, most recently, New Zealand's own independent strategic path. Each deployment is explored by official histories, but has attracted few other studies. McGibbon (1991, 1996) explores the experiences of the around 4,700 soldiers and sailors sent to Korea, while Pugsley (2003) documents New Zealand's decades-long contribution to the defense of Malaya. Both McGibbon (2010) and Rabel (2005) have covered New Zealand's role in Vietnam, which saw the country integrate its forces with that of Australia in the Phuoc Tuy province. After Vietnam, New Zealand's defense strategy departed from that of Australia, as the country embraced a smaller and more pacific defense posture, notably barring U.S. nuclear powered–ships from its ports. New Zealand has also had a long involvement in peacekeeping operations, examined by Crawford (1996). However, in most cases these histories form the bulk of scholarly work on New Zealand's military operations in the second half of the twentieth century.

Beyond the battlefield, New Zealand's historians have examined the way in which war has forged their national identity. Unlike in Australia, Anzac has not occupied the central place in New Zealand society. Indeed, despite supplying the key consonants to the term "Anzac," New Zealand tends to be forgotten in Australian commemoration in the war. The role of war in New Zealanders' identities has been only superficially examined, with the exception of Jock Phillips' (1989) exploration of Pakeha (white New Zealander) male identity, and the place of war within it.

By contrast, the study of Māori soldiers and their martial identity has been a significant subset of New Zealand military history. The 28th (Māori) battalion, for instance, which served in the Mediterranean during the Second World War, received its own volume in the official history of that conflict. Māori soldiers were, and continue to be, lionized for their
martial qualities, and Māori traditions, most famously the Haka war dance, have been incorporated into the New Zealand Defence Force’s ceremonies. Recently, the idea of Māori military identity has been examined by Francesca Walker (2012) through the prism of “martial race,” itself a resilient myth among minority and colonial soldiers throughout the colonial world. The central place and unique involvement of Māori soldiers in New Zealand’s wars represent a rich area of study that intersects social, military, and racial histories. Yet, no detailed scholarly work on Māori in the defense force has been attempted.

New Zealand military history will continue to be shaped by the relatively small size of the historical academy, which, combined with the absence of a national obsession with its wartime past in the vein of Australia, ensures that there is still much work to be done in the field. Examining the state of New Zealand war history, Montgomerie (2003, 74) argues that the rise in social history has reduced military history to “mere background.” Yet, she notes that military and social historians are “on common, though substantially uncharted, ground,” which bodes well for the future of the study of war and society in New Zealand.

Oceania

If there are gaps in the history of Australia and New Zealand’s past conflicts, historical writing on conflict in Oceania is exceptionally meager, conditioned by the region’s isolation and its tangential relationship to centers of geopolitical power and historical study. Compounding this is the difficulty in defining the Pacific, although it can be said to encompass the broad linguistic, ethnic, and cultural groups of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, with the smaller Oceania centered on the tropical Pacific south of the equator. With small populations separated by the vast Pacific Ocean or, in the case of the largest landmass of New Guinea, by jungle and mountains, the region has a profoundly diverse range of languages, political systems, and cultures. Indeed, Papua New Guinea alone is home to more than one-quarter of the world’s languages. Despite, or because of this complexity, the region is understudied by historians, and any engagement with Oceania’s conflicts and military necessarily embraces the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and political science.

As a result, the Pacific’s historiography is as disparate as its geography and, as David Armitage and Alison Bashford point out in their edited collection (2014), is set apart from histories of other world regions. Within the “kaleidoscopic” Pacific historiography, the study of war and society is sparse, and occupies two broad categories. First, it focuses on the structures and periodization of external, usually Western powers, particularly in relation to imperialism and colonialism. Although colonized later than the rest of the world, largely during the late nineteenth century, the Pacific was subject to the similar waves of European contact, annexation, involvement in the two world wars, and decolonization. Broadly, initial imagining of the effect of colonialism in the Pacific focused on the way in which the arrival of Europeans constituted a “fatal impact,” while postwar historical work sought to acknowledge the ways in which islanders negotiated their place with the colonial powers, in what is termed “islander agency.” The second category is composed of history that moves beyond a Western periodization, and looks to local, Pacific histories. This approach, however, tends to ignore military history as representative of a Western-oriented approach to the islands’ histories, and instead focuses on culture, race, and the environment. Armitage and Bashford’s book, for instance, contains chapters on these three themes, but none on conflict.

Moreover, the fragmentary nature of oral and documentary records has resulted in a tendency for precontact warfare to be presented in a “generalized” manner by historians and anthropologists. As Knauf (1990) argues, warfare was a common occurrence throughout Melanesia, although early European accounts marginalize the ferocity and magnitude of conflicts in the region. The small Western presence in the Pacific during the first decades of
colonialism—the result of disinterest from colonial metropoles rather than benevolence—meant that “traditional” warfare continued into the twentieth century. Indeed, Australian colonial officials entered the Papua New Guinean highlands region only during the 1930s, where they “discovered” hundreds of thousands of people. Oceania, therefore, offers a rich field for the anthropological and archaeological study of warfare; a significant proportion of Otto, Thrane, and Vankilde’s edited collection on this topic (2006) draws its material from Oceania and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in particular.

Colonialism influenced indigenous ways of war by changing the composition, governance, and interrelations of subject societies. Chris Gosden (2006) argues that as the colonial government extended its monopoly of violence—often through the use of violence itself—the governed peoples of PNG to varying degrees changed their methods of exchange, social relations, rituals, and concepts of maleness. Reflecting the broad church of academic scholarship in Oceania, in Gosden’s case the study of war and society has been used as “a crucial diagnostic aspect of social forms, their core values and history” (208).

Essentially, the First World War in the Pacific was an extension of the previous fifty years of the conflict between imperial powers in the region, albeit more overtly. By the end of the first year of the war, German colonies in New Guinea, Samoa, and the Marianas had been seized by Allied powers. Only a handful of land battles were fought, primarily in New Guinea. For some Pacific peoples, one colonial master was swapped for another, while for the majority, such as those in the New Guinean hinterland, the war meant little. Pacific peoples, marginalized in a region that was, at best, peripheral to the conflict, have attracted little scholarly interest. An exception is found in those histories that sought to reorientate away the Western periodization of the Pacific. Adrian Muckle’s study of 1917 in New Caledonia (2012) is an example of the way in which recent historians have reimagined the period away from the Western Front to localize the history of conflict. Examining the last of Kanak resistance in the French colony, Muckle here explores not just how war “happened” to indigenous peoples but also how local conflicts, politics, and life interacted with the larger war, or existed outside of it.

The Second World War, by contrast, caused profound upheaval throughout the Pacific, but until recently, there was also little scholarship on the Pacific experience of war. While much of the region remained the possession of Western nations, official histories and other writing conceptualized the indigenous populations as passive participants in the war, often willingly aiding their colonial masters but otherwise tangential to the conflict. Australia historian Hank Nelson led the field in exploring the racially based relationships between Allied troops and Papua New Guineans, who formed by far the largest group of indigenous participants in Oceania, with over fifty thousand men serving as laborers and three thousand as soldiers. Nelson (1980) also shed light on the racialized language used in histories of indigenous troops. Writing on the Pacific Islands Regiment, Nelson wrote that “while the praise is fulsome . . . there was tendency to see Papua and New Guinean talents in the bush and unsteadiness under artillery fire as fixed, as though they are as inherent as the curly hair and black skin” (203). Even in the twenty-first century, words such as “native” abound in campaign histories, and the indigenous troops are described as part of the backdrop of jungle, beach, and ocean. An exception is Alan Powell’s *The Third Force* (2003), which examines the military government of PNG during the war and the place of Papua New Guineans within it, placing the colonial nature of Australia’s place in PNG at the forefront of the study of military history.

A handful of studies have been written on the military contributions of the two major military forces provided by islanders in the Pacific, from PNG and Fiji. However, these tend to be narrative and nationalist, and focus on the fact that these men did serve, rather than offering any historical analysis of how, why, and in what context they did so. Only recently
have scholars attempted to examine indigenous service in an analytical rather than anecdotal manner, such as Noah Riseman (2012), who compares the experiences of Yonglu soldiers from Northern Australia, Papua New Guineans, and Navajo “code talkers” in order to explore the “hidden histories” of indigenous soldiers.

After the Second World War, scholars overwhelmingly saw conflict in the Pacific through the lens of decolonization and national development. While the bloody wars of independence of the scale seen in Asia or Africa did not occur in Oceania, the region has become a byword for national instability and widespread, low-level violence. From the wave of Pacific decolonization in the late 1960s, the region has seen coups in Fiji in 1987, 2001, and 2006, continued ethnic and community violence in PNG and the Solomon Islands, a small insurgency in New Caledonia in 1980, and a decade-long civil war on the Papua New Guinean island of Bougainville from 1988. Invariably, these conflicts are studied as contemporary problems to be solved. As a result the majority of scholarship can be categorized as contemporary political science rather than history. Indeed, older articles by political scientists have simply been taken as “history” by those examining the latest crisis, and in-depth archival and oral work remains to be attempted for much of the period. The strongest of these studies is Ron May’s The Changing Role of the Military in Papua New Guinea (1993), which places the development of the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) in its historical context while examining the interaction between the Australian-developed military with the nascent Papua New Guinean state.

The wealth of archival material on the colonial period and the relatively recent decolonization of Pacific nations leave a rich field of study of “new” military history in the Pacific. Tristan Moss’ Guarding the Periphery: The Australian Army in Papua New Guinea, 1951–75 (2017) explores the transformation of the Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR) from a colonial-style unit to the basis for the independent PNGDF. By integrating the study of the role and structure of the PIR with the experience of Papua New Guineans and the progression to independence, Moss bridges the traditional focus on outside influence in the Pacific with the local context. Such an approach also examines Australia as a Pacific nation, given the presence of Papua New Guineans in its army, and reveals the way in which the Pacific could reach back to touch the institutions of the colonial powers.

Like Pacific history more broadly, war and society approaches to the subject remain a niche area, with relatively few historians plying their trade among the islands and jungle. Moreover, the relatively recent ascent to nationhood among Pacific nations has meant that the region has only recently been seen in a historical light. Future work, therefore, will see historians shift their work away from the (admittedly pressing) needs of the present, to a close and dispassionate examination of the past. Moving beyond narrow definitions of what constitutes “war” to include ethnic and non-state conflict, as well as an effort not to see Pacific nations as “developing” and therefore unworthy of the often state-oriented discipline of military history, is key to this process.

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