

in the beginning

Until 1950 the Defence Act precluded the raising of full-time or 'standing' infantry, armour or cavalry units in Australia. In fact, when the Darwin Mobile Force was raised in 1939, 'infantry' soldiers were actually enlisted as artillerymen – even using the ranks of gunner and bombardier.

Legislation also prevented any soldier from serving overseas unless he specifically volunteered to do so. For this reason, after the outbreak of each of the World Wars, an Australian Imperial Force was raised on a volunteer basis for overseas service.

The perceived threat of Japanese invasion in 1942 did see Australian militia used overseas, but these were sent to carefully defined areas that were mostly Australian territories in Papua and New Guinea.

Australia fought the Second World War with three armies – the Permanent Military Forces (PMF), the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the militia – each with its own conditions of service.

While most soldiers who had fought during the war simply wished to be sent home as soon as the fighting stopped, there was still a clear need for full-time soldiers to carry on with the occupation of Japan, supervision of surrendered Japanese forces, holding of Borneo and the Dutch East Indies until British and Dutch forces could take over, and returning military equipment to Australia from various theatres around the world.

Planning for a post-war army had actually begun as early as 1944 and, at least within Army ranks, there was a clear assumption that a regular field-force of all arms would be required.

Three regular infantry battalions – the 65th, 66th and 67th Battalions – were drawn together from the ranks of the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions and sent, with other arms and services, to Japan, as the 34th Brigade, which arrived in February 1946.

Because they were to serve overseas, all members of the 34th Brigade had to be members of the AIF, or willing to transfer to the AIF. Interestingly, this deployment was still covered under provisions of war-time legislation that effectively remained in force until 1952.

Back in Australia, however, the wartime system of administering the Army had reverted to the peacetime system, with

a military board exercising control. High on the priorities list for this board was the raising of a regular army with a field-force element.

Although the brigade in Japan was legally part of the AIF and covered under war-time legislation, authorities in Australia began talking of it in terms of it already being the new regular force. The 'Interim Army' was a term bandied about as a convenient descriptor when discussing administrative matters in relation to the boys in Japan.

In February 1946 recruiting for the 'interim forces' began, with an initial two-year voluntary enlistment period. The Interim Army was officially created in May 1946 but the legislation was officially back-dated to October 1945.

By February 1947, all volunteers wishing to continue their service had been transferred to the Interim Army, and the AIF was officially disbanded in June 1947.

In August 1947 the Military Board suggested the Defence Act should be amended so that the PMF became the Regular Army with an initial enlistment period of six years. The minister agreed in September 1947, although the changes were not legislated for several years. In November 1947 the Board directed that the term Australian Regular Army should be used from then on, except for certain legal purposes.

By 1948, most other contributing countries had withdrawn their forces from Japan, leaving 34th Brigade to represent the armies of the Commonwealth. In November 1948 the Australian battalions were redesignated 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Australian Regiment.

In December all but 3AR (which was destined for Korea) were withdrawn from Japan. On arrival in Australia, 34th Brigade was redesignated 1st Brigade and its units dispersed around New South Wales and Victoria.

For the first time in its short history, Australia had a full-time infantry brigade during peacetime.



Soldiers of D Coy 2RAR demolish defences following the Korean ceasefire, at Majon'ni, Korea, 29 July 1953.

In March 1949 the Australian Regiment was granted the prefix Royal – the Royal Australian Regiment was born – thus making it harder for a subsequent government to disband the regular infantry force.

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would join the UN forces in Korea and 3RAR was warned for active service on 2 August. Under existing regulations however, all members of the battalion had to formally re-volunteer for service in Korea even though they had volunteered to serve overseas in Japan. This point was not lost on the government and, in September 1950, it announced that all future enlistees could be required to serve anywhere and currently serving members would be invited to sign an undertaking for such service.

On 14 August 1952 the Interim Army was formally disbanded and all its personnel transferred to the Australian Regular Army or the Regular Army Special Reserve.

So, although it has not always been the case, Australia today has an all-corps army – including full-time infantry battalions – standing ready to commit to unrestricted service anywhere in the world and at very short notice.

