

Foreword

Michael Howard

Fifty years ago, I compiled a Festschrift for Sir Basil Liddell Hart. Naturally, a key contribution had to be something about his influence on German military doctrine, which I had lined up a distinguished German scholar to provide. At the critical moment, he fell ill. I desperately asked Basil's advice about a replacement, and he made rather a surprising suggestion. There was a very able young Australian Rhodes scholar, he said, who had been consulting him about the thesis he was writing on the German Army and the Nazi Party. Why not try him? I did, and Captain Robert O'Neill produced, bang on time, a superb contribution that more than held its own in the company of those by, among others, Andre Beaufre, Henry Kissinger, Yigal Allon, and Alastair Buchan.

A few months later I found myself acting as an examiner for Bob's PhD thesis. In order to write it Bob had taught himself German well enough not only to read the relevant documents, but to seek out and interview many of the German officers and their relations who figured in his pages. It was a path-breaking piece of scholarship that could have led him straight into a distinguished academic career, had he not decided to remain in the Australian Army for long enough to serve in Vietnam and gain some first-hand experience of war. Had he remained in the army, he would certainly have gone straight to the top of his profession. As it was, after publishing another path-breaking work on General Giap, he reverted to academic life, where he was rapidly snapped up to undertake the thankless but essential task of writing the official history of Australia's role in the Korean War, a work that remains an indispensable — and highly readable — source for historians.

Military history remained a major interest for Bob, but it was rapidly overtaken — as it was for many other historians of his generation — by the broader field of strategic studies. He had been in England in the 1960s when we were getting the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) under way, and he became one of our earliest members. After he joined the staff of The Australian National University, we kept closely in touch with his activities, and he with ours. When we were seeking a new director in 1982, the experience Bob had gained and the contacts he had made while running the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in Canberra made him the obvious choice. All his predecessors had been European and their interests focused on the Cold War. Bob's Antipodean background and contacts enabled him to make the institute truly global at a moment when the Atlantic was ceasing to be the storm-centre of the world, and Japan, Korea, India, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia were becoming major actors on the strategic stage.

The five years that Bob spent at the institute gave him an international reputation. When the Oxford Chair of the History of War fell vacant in 1987, he chose to don the gown again and returned to the parochial world of academe. As his predecessor in that chair, I had eased his path by instituting the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 as a special subject for undergraduates, which he taught with all the enthusiasm and expertise to be expected from his background. He strengthened the strategic elements in the international relations courses already established by his fellow countryman Hedley Bull in the previous decade, and he brought new vigour to the extension of postgraduate studies throughout the university. At the same time, his extra-mural activities established him as a national figure. He became a member of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Governor of the Ditchley Foundation, a Rhodes Trustee, a trustee and later Chairman of the Imperial War Museum, and — not least — Chairman of the Council of the IISS, in which capacity he steered the institute through a constitutional crisis that had threatened to wreck it, and laid the foundations for the enormous expansion it has undergone over the past two decades. Then, at the dawn of the new millennium, he returned to Australia to pick up the threads that he had temporarily dropped 19 years before, and to begin a further, but by no means final, stage in a remarkable career.

How did Bob do it? There have been, of course, costs. After his return to academic life he wrote little. But his record of publication already spoke for itself, and he inspired plenty of his pupils to take up the challenge. But basically the key to his success has been his personality. He has an air of easy authority that immediately inspires confidence and marks him out as the obvious person to take charge of any enterprise to which he has set his hand. I have watched Bob's career for over half a century, and have seen how in every field in which he has been involved, he has won not only the respect of his colleagues, but their deep affection. He is a chairman made in heaven.

It is impossible not to like Bob. He is not just exceptionally able, but is an extraordinarily nice man. And he has had one supreme advantage: he has been blessed, in Sally, with an extraordinarily nice wife. God bless them both!

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