



WW2 ARMY UNIT DESCRIPTIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

Reference: McKenzie-Smith, Graham 2018 "The Unit Guide the Australian Army 1939-45 Vol 1-6 " Big Sky Publishing ISBN 978-1-925675-14-6

General

The span of VWMA's records spans every conflict since the turn of the 19th/20th Centuries. This poses some unique challenges.

WW1 saw over 330,000 men deployed overseas. However, it was largely an infantry Army, with the vast majority of troops allocated to 60 Infantry Battalions, numbered sequentially, in 15 Brigades across five Divisions. They were all logically structured and numbered with a notable hiccup caused by the contraction of the 1st Division from four Brigades to three at Gallipoli, to conform to British practice of the time. Late in the war, Brigades, initially of four Battalions, contracted to three because of a paucity of reinforcements.

WW2. The scale of Australia's involvement in WW2 was far greater, involving well over 1.4 million people in uniform, across three services and in the Army's case, three significantly different organisation structures.

The Reference above is without peer as the most authoritative source in respect to gaining an understanding of the enormous complexity of the Australian Army's WW2 organisation. It is an extraordinary piece of painstaking and diligent research that greatly informs what the Australian Army of WW2 looked like.

Definitions

The VWMA criterion for listing is whether the entity was of a size or disposition that warrants creation of a dedicated history. A 'unit' is effectively a Battalion / equivalent sized entity.

The term 'unit' is much disabused. In the Army lexicon, a 'unit' is an organisation of Battalion equivalent size. A 'Sub-Unit' is a Company equivalent. The VWMA limits its specific coverage of 'Units' to Battalion equivalent structures, with exceptions for some large 'All Arms' sub-units.

Designation	Equivalent	Number of Personnel	Commanded by
Division	2-3 Brigades plus Artillery Engineers and Army	10,000-15,000	Major General
Brigade	2-3 Battalions plus Artillery Engineers and Army	2,500-3,500	Brigadier
Battalion	3-4 Companies 'Regiment' (Armour Artillery and Engineers)	400-700	Lieutenant Colonel
Company	3 Platoons 'Battery', 'Squadron' (Armour, Artillery and Engineers)	100-120	Major / Captain
Platoon	3 Sections Troop (Artillery, Armour, and Engineers)	30-40	Lieutenant / Second Lieutenant
Section		10	Corporal

There are literally tens of thousands of 'units' in the DVA nominal rolls. This is because of a lack of coherent and unique naming conventions.

To address this, we have applied a process of aggregated listings and generate a consolidated history for classes of 'like' entities. This work is ongoing and is a function of matching resources against priorities.

Evolution of an Army

In WW2 the Australian Army mobilized to a level greater, per head of population, than many of the major combatant nations, particularly after the entry of Japan into the War in late 1941.

The sheer scale of the undertaking and relative inexperience of Army planners, led to a complex structure that was in some cases subject to repeated change.

Arguably one of the most destructive steps taken was the effective creation of two separate Armies: the Militia and the Second (2nd) Australian Imperial Force (AIF). This created a schism that has perpetuated to the present day with the derogatory term 'chokos' still being applied to the CMF / Militia ever since.

The initial configuration of the Army in WW2 was to provide troops to support the British in the UK and Middle East. The entry of Japan into the war and a shift in focus to Homeland Defence and began to blur the distinctions between force elements.

In the meantime, the failure to apply a structured approach to unit naming conventions and resulting mergers and duplications didn't help the cause of clarity.

Pre-War.

Prior to the outbreak of war the Army comprised two major branches.

Militia / Citizens Military Forces (CMF). A volunteer, territorially oriented organisation based around units and structures largely bearing designations derived from the AIF of WW1. Each of these units had a proximate association with a region, but not necessarily those which had spawned the WW1 Battalion with which it was affiliated.

For example, the 50th Infantry Battalion had been created by splitting the 10th Battalion after Gallipoli as part of the process known as 'The Doubling of the AIF'. The 16 Battalions of the First Division were each split to create a 'pup' Battalion.

The 50th Battalion had a strong affiliation with the Broken Hill area, which since Federation has been militarily at least part of South Australia.

However, in the Inter War years it was relocated to Victoria and its original affiliation and a lot of its history, was lost. A Second AIF version of the Battalion was not raised in WW2 – it had been in effect 'orphaned'.

Permanent Military Force. Numbering only about 1,500 personnel, many of whom formed part of the Coastal Artillery Defences around the nation, and the Army Instructional Corps.

World War 2

Second AIF – When War was declared in October 1939, the Government of the Day raised the 'Second AIF', invoking links with its WW1 precursor. It was an all-volunteer force and was specifically raised for overseas service.

Militia / Homeland Defence. When it looked likely that Japan would enter the war, a new sense of urgency prevailed. The definition of 'Eligible Male' was broadened and conscription extended, with all draftees being allocated to the Militia. Many later transferred to the 2nd AIF or to the RAAF and RAN.

Garrison Battalions. These were raised primarily to staff POW camps.

Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC). The VDC was originally raised by the Returned & Services League (RSL) in June 1940, comprising mainly returned men from WW1, many with exemplary war service. They were poorly equipped initially. The Army took over the VDC in October 1941 and restructured their organisation and training. They were given a designation that corresponded to their primary role eg. 'Coastal defense', 'local defense' etc. Later in the war some were 'shadow posted' to man anti-aircraft and coastal artillery assets.

Naming Conventions in the VWM.

The raising of so many different structures within the Army created huge potential for confusion and a nightmare of unit identification.

To minimise confusion on this site and differentiate between Battalions particular to specific conflicts, we have adopted a set of naming conventions.

- a. The AIF Battalions are numbered 1st to 60th (ie with superscript).
- b. The WW2 Militia Battalions are numbered without a superscript and with the addition of 'AMF' to distinguish them from their WW1 counterparts.
- c. VDC Battalions were State-based entities and numbering was replicated in each State. In the VWMA they are numbered with superscript followed by the State in which they were raised and operated.
- d. Garrison Battalions are numbered without a superscript.

A table to help 'decode' the main numbering systems is attached overleaf. While this addresses infantry units and formation, designations become if anything, more confusing for the other Arms and Services, particularly the Artillery which was notorious for re-structuring and re-designating its units and sub-units.

The Second AIF. Not all of the WW1 Battalions were replicated in the 2nd AIF. They went out of their way to differentiate Brigades for example, continuing the numbering system from the 15 raised in WW1, so the 2nd AIF Brigades started with the 16th.

The 2nd AIF was raised in a hurry, immediately after the declaration of war in October 1939 and restructured 'on the fly'. For example, Battalions were raised, and Brigades were rapidly formed; the 16th, 17th and 18th Brigades being among the first. A number of them found themselves in the UK, in June 1940, where they had been sent to bolster UK defenses after Dunkirk in May 1940. These Brigades /Battalions were initially allocated to the 6th Division, but some were subsequently re-allocated to the 7th Division.

Unit designations. All units were identified by the prefix '2/ ' ; In the VWMA we present them as enunciated, ie '2nd/' to avoid confusion with non-Australian units and organisations, where such a descriptor is often used to describe the Battalion with the first digit and the Brigade with the second.

Later in the war many Militia Battalions were designated as Second AIF units to allow them to be deployed in the Pacific campaign, which totally confused proceedings, but their unit designation did not have the 2/ appellation added.

Individual Service numbers. A clue to an individual's status can be gauged by their service number.

Every soldier was allocated a unique service number (unlike WW1 where service numbers were replicated across multiple units). The number was prefixed with a letter indicating the State of enlistment; 'N' for NSW, 'S' for South Australia etc.

If a soldier enlisted in or transferred to the 2nd AIF, a new service number was allocated with the addition of an 'X' in the prefix; eg SX, NX, WX etc, indicating the individual was available for overseas service.

Women's service numbers included an 'F' in both the Militia and the 2nd AIF.

Infantry Battalions of the Australian Army WW1 and 2

Formation / Unit	WW1	WW2 Militia (AMF)	WW2 2 nd AIF	WW2 VDC	WW2 Garrison
Inf Division	1-5	1-5	6-9	n/a	
Inf Brigades	1-15	1-15	16-26	VDC HQ in each Military District HQ	1 QLD 2 NSW 3 VIC 4 SA 5 WA
Inf Battalions	1 st to 60 th 1st,2nd,3rd & 4th Bns (all NSW) 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th Bns (all Vic) 9th (Q), 10th (SA) 11th (WA) and 12th (Tas) 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th,	1,2,3 (3/22), 4,5,6,7,8,9 (9/49), 10 (10/48), 11, 12/40, 12/50, 13 (13/33), 14 (14/32), 15,16,17,18, 19, 20 (20/34) 22,23/21,24 (24/39), 25,26,27,28, 29, (29/46), 30, 31 (31/51) 32, 33, 34, 35,36,37 (37/52), 38, 39, 40, 41 (41/2), 42, 43,44,45,46,47,48,49,5 1, 52,53, 54, 55, 55/53, 56, 57/60, 58 (58/59), 59, 61.	2nd/1st, 2nd/2nd, 2nd/3rd, 2nd/4th, 2nd/5th, 2nd/6th, 2nd/7th, 2nd/8th, 2nd/9th, 2nd/10th, 2nd/11th, 2nd/12th, 2nd/13th, 2nd/14th, 2nd/15th, 2nd/16th, 2nd/17th, 2nd/18th, 2nd/19th 2nd/20th, 2nd/21st, 2nd/22nd, 2nd/23rd, 2nd/24th, 2nd/25th, 2nd/26th, 2nd/27th, 2nd/28th, 2nd/29th, 2nd/30th, 2nd/31st, 2nd/32nd, 2nd/33rd, 2nd/34th, 2nd/35th, 2nd/36th, 2nd/37th, 2nd/40th, 2nd/43rd, 2nd/44th, 2nd/48th, 63rd, 64th, 65th, 66th, and 67th Battalions (BCOF)	NSW 1-33 VIC 1-24 QLD 1-23 SA 1-10 WA 1-16 TAS 1-5	33 Battalions and Companies numbered and allocated thus: QLD - 1, 14, 15, 32 NSW – 2, 7, 8, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 31 VIC – 3, 9, 12, 17, 23, 24 SA – 4, 25 (25/33), 33 WA – 5,10, 19, 29 TAS – 6, 30