We Three Hundred

by Lucas Grainger-Brown

I signed away ten years of my life at high school. Three hundred or so teenagers did likewise around the country; from Sydney and Melbourne to the wind-rustle quiet of burnt umber townships. We had similar reasons – wanting to be heroes and leaders, chasing self-respect, escaping loose ends, following Simpson and his donkey.

After graduation we cut our hair to regulation length, checked off items on a list in a thick wad of mailed instructions. We packed our luggage, teenage surfeit shrunk to military limits. Stiff in two-piece suits and shiny new leathers, family members farewelled, we converged on Canberra.

Canberra from above, in the throes of summer: a slice of suburbia deserted amid the pivot of a tumbleweed dust bowl; kindling grass chequered with vacant car parks; dark green mountains at the edge of the plateau. It was almost deserted. The politicians had gone home; locals had fled to the coast. The bushfire season consumed the headlines at a newspaper stand by the luggage carousel.

Buses with tinted glass awaited us. In a strange quiet, cocooned by the thrumming air-conditioning, we endured an anxious trip along the highway. Halfway up a gradual rise overlooking dry scrubland dotted with brick whitewash, our convoy turned through insignia-crusted walls. Into a strange city we burrowed, among Brutalist buildings stacked on the concave hillside like a Brazilian favela. Strangers began shouting at us. I caught the eye of another passenger and we shared a moment of sangfroid. We had arrived at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

ADFA is a degree factory for commissioned officers, a feeder institution for the three branches of the Australian Defence Force – Army, Air Force, Navy. In the ADF, commissioned officers are appointed to lead the non-commissioned soldiers of Her Majesty's dependency. The promise of status and a three-year delay in earning it while studying at ADFA is a major selling point for young Australians who are thinking, but perhaps a little chary, of enlisting. Not that many people are aware of this product catalogue and sales pitch. You have to attend the right high school career fairs or browse certain webpages to hear the carefully modulated call.

To the public, ADFA remains a well-kept secret, hidden in a sleepy hollow beneath Mount Pleasant on the outskirts of residential Canberra. It presents as a genteel private school, nurtures an image of youthful potential, national service, hygienic self-improvement, and sleek patriotism. This mixture appeals to some middle-class school-leavers and their parents.

In my day, the marketing tools were computer giveaways, uniformed salespeople, and glossy pamphlets. These were works of art: young silhouetted faces in serious attitudes beneath the slant of a slouch hat inlaid with the bayonet rays of the Rising Sun. Amphetamine for the respectably red-blooded. I still have my pamphlet. Sometimes I gaze at the monastic tableau and yearn to join up all over again.

We three hundred were sold a reassuring world

of black and white. A tough challenge, a good cause. Rectitude. Purpose. Guaranteed positions in the upper echelons of Australia's doughtiest patriarchy. Group of Eight degrees in our kit. Who Dares Wins. Duty First. Where Right and Glory Lead, etc., etc.

Even before our arrival, some of the ambiguities and paradoxes awaiting us became evident. On the flight I met one of few people who fitted the hallowed Australian Army officer mould that I had volunteered to fill. This man – let us call him John – inspired fear through his mere physical presence, his speech and gestures fraught with hair-trigger preludes to rage. John's leonine eyes fixed on me over Qantas cheese and crackers. It was plain at a glance that he wouldn't fit in many places outside the military. Later, out on the town, I often found him in the middle of a brawl, shirtless, stammering, drunk.

Wittgenstein wrote, 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.' I intuited as such with John. On the plane we compared fangs, growling testosteronic stories that were – at least in my case – fables. My fictions seemed to persuade John. He didn't make me for an impostor, which is what I was; didn't strangle me with the airsickness bag.

From then on, full-frontal lion-baiting became my approach to military life. It proved a successful behavioural course. This mentality gradually transformed me, swelled my body, shortened my hair, scarred my arms, broke my teeth. Metamorphosed me, in short, into a simulacrum of John.

Officer Cadet Grainger-Brown with his mother at ADFA, 2011

John was ahead of the curve. He already fitted the blueprint. Bookish types like me were meant to achieve what John was by submitting to the trivial ordering and self-polishing that characterises life in the Academy. Meanwhile, John and his ilk waited listlessly in the wings, ready for their chance to go to war.

On arrival at ADFA we were sectioned off from the rest of the Academy and drilled dawn to dusk. Ironing clothes. Folding bed corners. Marching. Running. Standing. Shaving. Shooting. Likewise, personal finances, communal hygiene, military history, proper decorum, correct push-up execution. The sergeants drove us to replace the comportments of our former selves. They worked on the body and the mind concomitantly. It was a process of carefully timetabled adaptation.

We're not here to fuck spiders. That was the chivvying catchphrase with which they ratcheted up the pressure. We heard it so often we internalised the concept. Repeated it to one another, laughing less at the inane imagery as the stakes grew larger. WE'RE NOT HERE TO FUCK SPIDERS. Chuckle-chuckle. Faltering at the barbed wire: OPERE CITATO, smoke grenade, overhead machinegun burst. Shit-shit-shit.

They had virtuoso ways of speeding us along. Off the bus, into ranks, into camouflage, into dormitories – 'the lines' – into cleaning, into regulations, onto the parade ground. Onwards, outwards, sidewards: part of a grand ancient folkway designed to hurtle us towards our new regimented selves as regularised automatons that had no time to fuck spiders.

Sergeants tweak the base instincts underlying cooperation. *Climb the hill, and then we'll rest.* Before you know it, a mountain range is fading over your shoulder into the nacreous horizon. They had me vexed about everything: shaving and toilet cleaning and rifle-range manslaughter. I made lists of things to practise in my own time, but it was no use. There was no time; time no longer existed.

Most nights I stayed awake until early morning, painstakingly ironing a crumpled shirt by the light of the moon. Terrified the sergeants would see my light on. They lurked outside in the bushes, pelting lit windows with rocks and then rousing us all to the breezeway in our pyjamas to be screamed at. When my creases seemed presentable, I would lie on the floor – the sheets took too long to straighten otherwise – and resist sleep so I could savour a few moments of peace and silence.

Deprived of thinking time, life became a muddled conveyor belt of mechanical actions. The wider arc of days, weeks – what felt like months – collapsed into endless cycles of activity. Doubt and reflection, the little deaths of obedience, vanished from our lives. Not lives any longer, but agglomerations of happenings. To deal

with the endless stream of events, we banded together – for the most part. There were exceptions: those unable to chime with the group, low-hanging fruit ripe for bastardry. We abandoned the exceptions outside our protective ranks. They served as bait for the sergeants.

A man I will call Dave was an enormous beast with a stoic disposition. His manner was steady but not lugubrious, reserved but not unpleasant. Dave simply didn't care what people thought of him or did to him. He was destined to fail. The key to survival as a recruit is amour propre. Nothing but collective norms and individual egos get us through basic training.

We three hundred were sold a reassuring world of black and white

We learned to love Dave. We laughed at him behind frozen expressions on the parade ground as he copped flak. When he tried to march, his body flailed around; when he halted, he tripped over. The war-bitten vultures circled him, shrieking, jangling his nerves, hovering an inch from the end of his nose. He was our Gomer Pyle. But we learned to hate Dave when his punishments affected us. Then he was our Guy Fawkes.

I began to like Dave again when I found out how little he cared and how free that made him. He wore heavy metal T-shirts under his uniform, kept a bottle of scotch in his gun safe, and spent Saturday nights in clubs searching for a fight. Dave was too much himself, whatever that was, to be co-opted. We neophytes had a lot of growing up to do, but Dave was the Army's Peter Pan. Eventually, he gave up pretending to care and discharged himself.

There were a few Daves among us, blown serendipitously into recruitment off the streets. Most dropped out after six months. Those of us who stayed were mostly jumpers, my gerund for the upwardly mobile via the Defence Forces. There were a lot of us at ADFA.

The Academy, which opened in 1986, is specifically designed to capture the career calculator. It must have been hard to recruit after Vietnam, harder still when Gorbachev came to power. No great enemies left to impel patriots into service. Inducements were needed. A free degree; a breather between high school and deployment; the illusion that martial skills translate to the ordinary economy. Perhaps the War on Terror provided a brief respite, something to stir the bourgeois classes that produce officers. But then came the predictable consequences of Middle Eastern adventurism; running battles in arid nations accomplished at killing invaders; WMDs and oil and a fashionable distaste for the US war machine. Suffice to say, the subtext of my enlistment was not *ask not what your country can do for you* but rather *what's in it for me*?

Most of us grasshoppers were fairly prosaic in our ambitions. Five or ten years, a promotion, one or two overseas deployments, discharge into business or politics or academia. There were a few jumped-up jumpers, though; repressed artists and would-be messiahs on heat for authority. Let's call one of them Jack. As in Jack Merridew from *The Lord of the Flies* before he gets a taste for hunting.

Jack was fairly tall with narrow shoulders, full-moon eyes, and a shark-fin nose. He hailed from a tony high school about which he often reminisced. Back there he'd allegedly been somebody. In Basic Training we were scum and shit out of luck. Which was the whole point. Trudging, footsore, yelled at, head sore. Forget your senior school year, prom date, and grade point average; *never* forget you ain't nothing special. Sergeant shits better soldiers than you.

Jack knew he was special though. Splendour was ingrained in his marrow. Only on Day One would he stand in brief solidarity with the rest of us mugs, mostly due to shock. Goldfish mouthing, flabbergasted, wrestling the preservative urge to sprint back to the bus, motor to the airport, leap on the first flight. On Day Two, Jack made his first move.

Late in the evening, one of the sergeants called us to a room in the lines. He summoned us by looming in the stairwell and bellowing until we compacted, thirty strong, nose to armpit and in various states of undress, around one of the crappy ten-dollar ironing boards the quartermaster's store had issued us earlier that day. Growling at us, Sergeant demonstrated, with impeccable strokes, the precise ironing tricks needed to correctly present every item in our seven-piece uniform wardrobe.

After this, Jack took control. He summoned us to the common room and laid out his plan to reduce the friction of our induction. We would spend the night preparing the lines to the sergeant's impossibly high inspection standards. Just this once, though. Our verve, our *esprit de corps*, our virile can-do, would dumbfound the sergeants. They would realise the calibre of their pupils. We leapt at the hope he was offering.

Next morning the sergeants stood blinking in the glare of a thousand brass implements refracting through a thousand varnished windows and spit-shined whitewash walls. In our impeccable uniforms, we ran laps around the Academy until we puked. One does not pre-empt Basic Training. Nor does one react. One merely clings on as the waves of bile and misery wash unendingly over.

Jack tried other gambits. He had to. For him control was essential. He was anatomically incapable of surrendering or allowing the Academy to take over. For the next few weeks we cut his thrashing legs from underneath him – small deeds, in every sense. Jack's esteem never recovered. He retreated to sardonicism, detachment, and affectation. Many ruinous months later he spat out his masticated pride and left.

In retrospect, those first inflexible weeks were the easy part. Not physically or emotionally. We were always

tired. Sometimes we cried about petty things. A sock went missing; a tile would never get spotless. Nevertheless, the rigour had a purifying clarity that made every humiliation bearable.

The ADFA we endured in Basic Training was the packaged one – the face under a slouch hat bit. Easing into your imagined role in a national mythology. That marketed ADFA – dramatised in the ABC documentary *The Academy*, which we had all watched before enlisting – lasted six weeks. Then we were ready to join the main body of cadets. Things went downhill from there.

Friends and family flew to Canberra to witness our triumphant emergence from Basic Training. They scarcely recognised us in parade-ground coffle. We were granted a weekend's leave to reassure them. My assurances, at least, were a performance. By Sunday I was happy to farewell my parents and my little brother. I love them but they had reinscribed my old self. And it was an old self, the contour of an eighteen-year-old superseded at a rate of three years per week.

After Basic Training we were released from our chrysalids, partially gestated. Mean, assured, anaclitic – and suddenly directionless. For the following three years we reverted back to ordinary human privileges and had to navigate our own way between formative, still adolescent, capabilities and the shadow of the Aussie Digger we'd been told, ad nauseum, we would never be worthy to lead.

No sooner had we farewelled our relations than a procession of cars with P plates revved their way through the gates of ADFA. Overnight, ascetic restrictions yielded to anything goes. Autos, bikes, rock climbing cordalettes, fireworks, Xboxes – anything legal that we wanted and could cram into our garrets and car park spaces, we could have. One cadet spent his accumulated pay on a massive television that covered his window. He spent most of his free time obscured behind an alpine range of DVDs. The Berlin Wall had come down. Ours was the liberation of the credit card.

The fracturing of our platoon group-think into disparate identities culminated as a rabid build-up of appurtenances. I ordered a bushel of Penguin books, Ray Bans, and a bar fridge – a smidgen of individuality to help build my personal brand among a sea three hundred bodies wide. Micro-cults emerged. Motor heads, gym rats, hard cases. Material stereotypes pasted over our common military denominators. For some, blue jeans and guitars from which a tune was never coaxed became de rigueur.

Casual roll-calls began to look like John Wayne meets Mad Max meets Ned Kelly conventions. Black cut-off T-shirts and flannel shirts and Akubras sprung up like fungal growths on clothes lines. Idiots went to bars and picked fights with 'civilians' - a long-standing tradition, passed down by the second and third years. One fixture of Canberra nightlife is the spiritual turf war between ADFA and the Australian National University. Our cohort took to the custom with joie de vivre.

Next weekend the new chrome motorcade, stuffed with beer-loaded cadets, rumbled out the gates. I remained in the lines with our platoon's designated Duty Officer. He was a smarter version of Jack. Smart Jack and I had a tentative rapport. I would help him perform his role as Duty Officer and vice versa. My responsibility that night was to assist him in corralling his troops come our ten o'clock curfew – a Sisyphean task. We watched *Band of Brothers* until nine-thirty, then we began working the phones. Based on garbled replies, we mapped out a recovery operation and dispatched taxis. Balanced above Jack's perspiring head was a network of temporary Duty Officers responsible for Squadron, Year, and, finally, Academy roll-checks. A single AWOL pleb could run the administrative gamut to the Commandant's ears. Then our entire platoon would be on remedial drill until the End Times. Smart Jack began talking to himself, a habit of his at times of stress. Though comical, it made sense; I found myself doing the same in like situations.

Smart Jack couldn't reason with his bushwhacked peers. *C'mon, guys, do it for me, I'm your buddy.* That was a Duty Officer's only recourse; in reality we were all powerless. Smart Jack couldn't appeal to some god or higher institution. His only ecclesiastical commitment was vested in the same organisation in which he was powerless. He couldn't admit, even to me, the palpitating fear that this Kafkaesque situation induced. Cadets never confess their frailties. All Smart Jack had by way of a sympathetic audience was Smart Jack. That debauched night he encapsulated the illogical lives we lived beneath our martial and maverick exteriors.

I remember vividly the last time I saw Smart Jack, days before my discharge. After a stint in hospital I was deposited in his section while they were 'out field' conducting manoeuvres in the bush. This field exercise was a survival course, and Smart Jack had been without proper food, sleep, and water for about three days. Muttering a low chorale of self-encouragement, he was listing like a zombie, unresponsive except for trained reflexes. It took three salutations for him to recognise me. I tried to sneak him some food but he wouldn't take it. They couldn't, they shouldn't, and they weren't allowed. That's what he said. Those were his orders. Only one ration pack per person, per issue: no cheat snacks from the outside world. Smart Jack is still in the Army.

I distrusted Smart Jack, yet liked him. We were birds of a feather, with two exceptions. He wanted to be an Army officer more than I did. More importantly, he never latched onto an external reference point like I did. Inside the whitewash walls we lived like members of the priesthood, cloistered from the external world. Somehow, by pure chance, the world found me, but not Smart Jack.

My ADFA years were a grinding tug-of-war played out on quicksand. Whenever I found my footing, the terrain would shift beneath me. The pendulum swung witlessly between bohemian excesses and soldierly bonhomie. We were typical teenagers, troupers

in the Stanford Experiment, disciples to total war. The central theme was our trying to build, from misbegotten pieces, a façade worthy of respect and worthy of leading heroes; painstakingly finding a self amid a massive and regularised machine only to misplace that gossamer sensibility.

Most of the day the cadet body was dismembered, wandering across campus to classes. We did a few hour blocks of military training every other day. In the main, we were university students in uniform. Worse, we were teenagers with disposable income, bed and board. Occasionally, we handled heavy weapons between tutorials, which reinforced our delusional concept of soldiering. *Call of Duty* boomed from every building: Army types 'simulating combat' in twelve-hour, somnambular stints. Military curios, books on tactics, protein powders, and pre-workout formulas were massed in cupboards. I stole milk jugs from the mess fridge every other day. At night I read von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, sipping PURA from a frosty glass.

Kirk, an exchange cadet, was king of our frenetic gym culture. He and his posse competed in bodybuilding competitions. Developing muscle was a sign of possession, control, will power, self-worth, for we that had surrendered our autonomy. The police busted several steroid rings across the armed services. Kirk went home under a cloud. His best mate became more extreme in his solitary pursuit. Speed-walking laps around the oval at four in the morning, melting the last slivers of adipose from his abs. Soon after, he quit to start a weightlifting club.

Besides voluntary dropouts, some devotees of workouts or parties or PCs or fast machines made themselves useless at routine fitness tests. Or, worse still, incapable of passing what was our true test, the battle blocks.

The gauntlet of each ADFA year occurred between semesters. Then we cadets were signed over to our parent services to conduct three or four weeks' training, during which our judiciously wrought or lifestyle-blunted mettle was tested. There were formal goals and learning objectives. But the real threat was reputational.

If we survived the pitfalls of each block – successfully avoided shitting ourselves in gas chambers, contracting a crotch infection on a bush march, attacking the wrong hill during manoeuvres – we kicked back once more, mission accomplished, to our easy pastimes and displaced fear of the next tribulation. Past triumphs and future insecurities amplified our eccentric perversions.

I shaved my head and bought a bike, crashed the bike and bought a car. The crash was potentially fatal: still accelerating out of animal fright, I was heading for a massive eucalypt. A ditch and gravity intervened and I somehow ended up with mere bruising and a moonboot on my left foot. The accident happened over summer. When I began my second year, I turned up at our next 'battle block' in full combat gear and a moonboot. We were deployed to rural Victoria at the height of the bushfire season. Listening in on the section radio for news of inferno fronts while we patrolled vast tracts of wilderness in pursuit of non-existent objectives, sweeping creek beds and killing fields with rapid fire from our blank-loaded rifles.

The author inspects his equipment at RMC, 2012

I completed that rotation and won extra kudos for taking part in a moonboot. I returned to ADFA on a high, lethal stupidity gainfully alchemised. I had cracked the riddle of ADFA. The Academy is a degree factory and a counterfeit factory. Image is its currency. Appearance and symbolism are the only ways to resolve, or at least delay, the contradictions of life behind the whitewash walls.

The psychology of an ADFA cadet is inseparable from the nature of the Australian Defence Force. The ADF remains a thoroughly modern structure quite unsuited to the current epoch. ADFA's role in the aged apparatus is that of crucible, in which the pluralistic individuals of a free and reasonably equal society are indoctrinated with the orthodoxy required to send soldiers over the top, as in 1915. But this era is, in every imaginable way, incompatible with trench warfare. War

nowadays is televised; body bags are political kryptonite. Add to that a complex globalised-capitalist matrix that warps narrow alliances into transnational economies. Add to that an overweening war fighting asymmetry between the rich and the poor that renders terrorism so common. On our side of the battlefield, drones and algorithms have replaced cunning and tactics. Tactical nukes and government hackers have superordinated a soldier's skill and endurance.

Despite this, the West remains shackled to the thinking that a nation is not a nation without a sizeable conventional defence force. 'Conventional', in this context, means prepared for early twentieth-century patterns of carnage: the world wars and superpower rivalry. Australia is no exception. We churn out the officers of yore to staff the tank divisions of yesteryear. We cadets read Rommel as though our mastery of manoeuvre warfare could make an iota of difference in a nuclear-armed world.

The Academy is a degree factory and a counterfeit factory. Image is its currency

Our major battles today are with failing social systems. Mass armies meant for yesterday's geopolitics. Duopolistic political parties that serve vested powers. Sclerotic welfare states that struggle to deliver functional services. Tidal waves of technology that erode a clear sense of national identity a million times more effectively than a few boats drifting across the Pacific. As a collective, the industrialised world is fumbling with twenty-first-century challenges of global warming and irregular migration. Exponential population growth and the buckling of an exhausted planet dictate our crises.

We cadets reflected these ambiguous trends in our approach to the military vocation. My motivations were my prospects, my family, and the good I thought the military might do in emergencies, in peacekeeping. For my generation, questions of country and duty rarely enter into day-to-day belief systems, despite vague shibboleths and the odd Southern Cross tattoo impulsively selected from a tattoo artist's brochure. My dilemma, as a cadet, was how patriotism should motivate me. How could historic lessons make my duty easier? I treated legacy like a resource. I didn't believe. There was no stimulus to believe: I was born in a country untroubled by obvious threats. My generation has yet to face anything like the Depression, the Evil Hun, the Conquering Jap, the Evil Empire. Related concepts of strong nationhood, shared monoculture, and existential unity are only accessible to me piecemeal.

By contrast, Dmitri had a tangible and systemic commitment to his values. He was clumsy, serene, gangly, acne-scarred, desperately kind, and embarrassingly religious. Faith gave Dmitri fortitude. Which was just as well, because it placed him in a corner among a platoon full of atheists and assholes. When the sergeants stared Dmitri down, he genuflected. When some yokel buttonholed his metaphysics, he elucidated. Dmitri was too virtuous for the postmodern generation and our syncretic take on the military. Ambivalence was our norm; covering it up our aim. The end justifies the means. That was how we dealt with an inflexible martial organisation as twenty-first-century teenagers. Dmitri could see the difference between his deep faith and our shallow attachment to civic pride and military iconography. He became disillusioned with us. Finally, he packed his bag and quit.

Of the various departures, Dmitri's had the biggest impact on me. I had learned to trust him. He even coaxed me into visiting the padre one Sunday. We made a sorry sight, Dmitri and the padre and I, in the mess. While they soft-pedalled scripture I sipped my coffee, wondering how a man of Jesus ends up in uniform.

The tension between the monolithic traditions we were inheriting and the mongrel culture in which we were maturing was most apparent on Anzac Day. Much has been made of the profit-soaked circus that Anzac has become. In his book *ANZAC's Long Shadow*, James Brown, a former soldier, lays out an incisive argument about what that means for our country. For us, the April 25 burlesque meant confronting everything we were play-acting at being.

We awoke each Anzac Day morning to plangent gunfire. Slurping lukewarm coffee reinforced with rum. We were driven in a convoy of buses to the Australian War Memorial and stood in semi-circular ranks in front of the cenotaph, joining a thick knot of bodies already huddled against the freezing gusts hurling down Anzac Parade. My overriding memory of those days is of figures pressed close, sharing warmth against scorching cold. A formless mass shoulder-to-shoulder with eyes shut tight as the bugle calls. Shiveringly trying to share the same imaginary: Simpson and his donkey, et al.

In my third year I was part of the catafalque guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on that most hallowed of days. I saw the sun rising over Parliament, framed by bronze sheets filled with names of the dead. Arrayed beneath the dawn, the respectful faces of the audience, pale ovals in the wavering gloom. I faced them, resplendent in full dress uniform, gleaming bayonet, superlative creases many hours in the making. I felt like a complete fraud. How otherworldly strange to stand at one's national memorial, in uniform, and feel that way. Apart from drill commands I remained stock-still. Blank-slate. Metronomic. The absurdity didn't trouble me. The absurdity was everyday. For twenty-nine months I had been immersed in incongruity, performance, imagery, farce. My imago of John had been nurtured in such amniotic fluid. I was inured to yen and melancholy.

Now I see my mortification as natural before the cultural ideograms we cadets coveted and literalised. No one measures up to the stories we spin about our war heroes. It is impossible to identify with them. The birth-of-a-nation mythopoeia reifies them beyond human recognition.

In truth, our supermen were just people doing what they had to, what people in extremis must do. We should remember them. Absolutely. But the weight of an entire national sense of self overwhelms them – Weary Dunlop and the Victoria Crosses, Simpson and Monash, and all the rest we can't name because they are just one sedulous archetype: the Plucky Larrikin Warrior, the Aussie Digger. Since Gallipoli we haven't updated our definition of heroism or public service beyond that of clichéd bravery and sacrifice for country – valiant males tested by the execrable violence of industrial war.

Where are the contemporary Australian parables being written? Not in verminous holes on the outskirts of Amiens. Not in the hellacious mud of Papua. At least not with guns and grenades as styluses. Contemporary Australia will never return to the trenches of last century. Nonetheless, our repertoire of civic virtues is still calibrated according to those bloodsheds. Without new vistas, ADFA's cadets and Australia's youth can only be pretenders to foundational legends.

Eight months after my turn as catafalque guard, I marched out of the ADFA dreamscape and into the stark embrace of the Army's Royal Military College. RMC – cloaked in chill mist, haunted by the mighty dead – is a lonely set of Elizabethan homesteads adjacent to ADFA, a working farm commandeered early in the twentieth century for the training of gentlemen killers. Here the hardcore Army tuition began, joined by an entirely other ensemble.

When I left ADFA I tried to wring some pathos from the milestone. I drove my car to the top of Mount Pleasant, the rise separating ADFA and RMC. From the lookout, I pondered the white brickwork arena. Fog was rising from the parade grounds. The walkways were empty, ant-like figures packed their vehicles. Interminable grass fields surrounded the installation, undulated by wind. I still see ADFA as it appeared then: a weathered headland amid a slumbering sea.

Eventually, the Academy will give way to catalysed whitecaps. Numerous attempts have been made to shut the place down. Some in the services view it as a liability, redundant, a waste of resources. There are periodic sex scandals; too few make headlines. The Skype affair of 2011 did; so too, the rape of a female cadet in 2014. Tip: iceberg. There have been frequent reviews of the ADF's culture of harassment. Public opinion and/or bureaucratic fusillades will eventually put an end to the ADFA experiment.

Until then, bleak irony thrives at the Academy. It presents itself as a bastion of ethical cultivation. Its stated purpose is the doctrinaire training of officers who will command combat-ready troops. The nature of combat has changed. So has the syntax of command. The Australian milieu from which officers are drawn continues to change and evolve. The ADFA doctrine persists, oblivious to its own self-satire.

Somewhere between the vaulting Academy motto – *To Lead, To Excel* – and its structural penchant for scandal, life at ADFA fades into grey. The same grey wash that bleeds out of holding too tightly to the icons of a national imaginary long since outmoded. And so we three hundred cadets, annually inducted, can at least take comfort that our three-year purgatory likewise plays out across the country in macrocosm. ■

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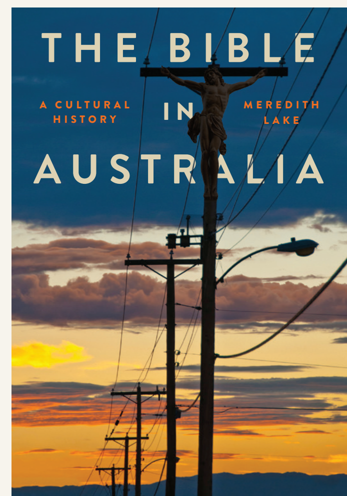

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