



THE END OF A UNIQUE INSTITUTION

By Bill Goff

Fifty years of colourful history ended with the closure late last year of the AusAID Centre for Pacific Development and Training at Middle Head, Sydney.

ACPAC and its various predecessors will be remembered collectively with great respect and affection by those who taught and learned there as well as many others who came into contact with the institution and its unique role.

This article outlines the early years of the institution when, as the Australian School of Pacific Administration, it acquired something of a distinctive charisma as well as its distinctive role.

That role had its genesis in World War II, when a famous mover and shaker of the time, Lieutenant Colonel Alf Conlon, decided the Australian Army needed a research section to tackle major strategic contingencies such as what to do if Japan invaded Australia.

Conlon convinced the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Blamey, and the proposed unit became the Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs, attached to Blamey's own staff.

The unit eventually found a home at Royal Military College Duntroon in early 1945. It had already undergone the first of its name changes, being known now as the Land Headquarters School of Civil Affairs.

MILITARY TO CIVILIAN – JUST!

The end of war in the Pacific actually brought the first of many threats to the School's existence. However the Federal Government ultimately decided, in May 1947, to set up a civil school and move it in to a group of Army huts on Middle Head. It had another new name, this one to last for many years, as the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA).

Just how close the institution came to being still-born as a civilian school was revealed only months later in a speech prepared by John Kerr, (later Sir John Kerr QC, and Governor-General of Australia) who had taught law at the School during the war and became first Principal of ASOPA. Kerr wrote:

The idea was opposed, and opposed in influential quarters. Attempts were made when the time came to demobilize the Military School to bring the whole academic venture to an end. ... We were determined that what had been created should not be destroyed. In this we succeeded.

Kerr had obviously displayed some early political skills, because not only was ASOPA established, but he also became Organising Secretary of the interim South Pacific Commission, which was conveniently housed in the same group of Army huts as the School.

A MAGNET FOR TOP PEOPLE

The capacity to attract top-notch staff, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it was far from a conventional academic institution, was a feature of the centre right through its history.

Just a couple of examples from the very first years will demonstrate the point. Mere tutors included James McAuley, later Professor of English at the University of Tasmania and one of Australia's most celebrated poets, and Peter Ryan, who went on to become head of Oxford University Press.

Senior to these at the time was an impressive list of professorial talent drawn from United Kingdom as well as Australian academic institutions, many of them attracted to the School through the energy and enthusiasm of Alf Conlon.

Another historically interesting appointment soon after ASOPA commenced was the outstanding young linguist Nancy Robson. Much later, of course, Mrs Robson was to become the second wife of John Kerr and join him in residence at Yarralumla.



CHANGING ROLES AND STUDENTS

The original ASOPA offered one year and shorter courses, including refreshers. They were offered exclusively for Australian people who were going to work in the administration of post-war Papua-New Guinea.

A typical ASOPA student was certainly not your average school leaver. Immediately after the war enrolments were taken from military men. When civilian candidates were admitted soon afterwards, preference was given to those with some working experience as well as good academic records. Many turned out to be young men who had lived in PNG and whose parents had careers or businesses there.

In 1954, ASOPA also took on the specialist training of Australian teachers for service in PNG, to help that country develop a base of primary education. At the same time, similar specialised units were offered to teachers recruited for "Special" (Aboriginal) Schools in the Northern Territory of Australia.

The last Director of ACPAC, Andrew Akwast (centre) with AusAID Deputy Director General Bruce Davis (right) and former director and AIDAB Branch Head John Wolfe, at the farewell to ACPAC.

The relevant ASOPA staff certainly battled the tyranny of distance for three years from 1956, when the teacher cadets, as they were known, were placed at faraway Bathurst Teachers' College, but the training course was eventually transferred to Middle Head in 1959.

The next decade saw ASOPA introduce training for secondary teachers as well as other, gradually more specialised courses in the administration field. The 1960s also brought the first non-Australian client groups to the school for some courses.

There was a major change of focus for the institution in 1970. The Australian Government called on ASOPA to help correct a serious lack of trained indigenous administrators capable of running PNG when it became an independent nation.

The school enrolled up to 60 Papuans and New Guineans in ten-month courses at two levels. At the same time, training of Australians to serve in PNG was phased out.

The old Army huts in their tranquil North Head setting, circa 1960.

In later years there was more internationalisation of ASOPA's work. Although students from PNG remained strongly represented, increasing numbers of students from other developing countries in the Pacific and elsewhere were taken on.

The school became formally linked to Australia's official aid agency (then ADAA) in 1973. Its courses soon became more numerous and specialised and its administration and accountability changed radically.

As part of those changes the name of the institution was changed to International Training Institute, thus bringing to an end the 25-year existence of ASOPA.

ASOPA started as a school for Australians going to leadership and/or authority positions as expatriates in our official external territory of Papua New Guinea.

At the end, it was offering courses to Papuans and New Guineans and, increasingly, to people from other developing countries with no colonial or other historical dependency relationship with Australia. It was no longer training Australians for service overseas.

ASOPA thus reflected in its own way a great change of mindset (and political geography) that occurred throughout the non-Communist world over approximately the same period. The long colonial period was ending, and the world was coming to grips with a set of challenges newly formulated around the concepts of developed and developing nations.



GREAT BOOK COLLECTION WILL REMAIN INTACT

The precious Hallstrom Pacific Collection of rare books has found a new home after 50 years as the centrepiece of the library at ACPAC and its predecessors on Middle Head.

At a ceremony at the University of New South Wales on 8 October 1997, AusAID formally handed over the collection. It is now officially owned by the National Library and on permanent loan to the University.

The collection originated in 1948 in a bequest of 10,000 pounds by Sir Edward Hallstrom, the Sydney philanthropist best known for the refrigerators he manufactured and as a major benefactor of the Taronga Park Zoo.

Less well known was Sir Edward's love of Papua New Guinea, and it was this that led him to make the bequest to the then newly opened ASOPA (Australian School of Pacific Administration).

The donated library comprises more than 1600 volumes, including many rare and valuable books from Sir Edward's own collection. Among the most notable items are:

- the first edition of John Gould's five-volume "Birds of New Guinea";
- Captain James Cook's account of his explorations in 1777 and 1785;
- Hawkesworth's edition of Cook's explorations dated 1773; and
- "An Essay on the East India Trade" author unknown, dated 1696.

The oldest book in the collection is "An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies", by Robert Knox, published in 1681.

Speaking at the 8 October function, AusAID Deputy Director General Ms Deborah Stokes said the collection was significant for its historical and anthropological research value. It included works on colonial administration, exploration history and anthropology in the Pacific and Asia.

"It is very pleasing to note that the collection will be kept intact and conserved by the University of New South Wales and that it will continue to be known as 'The Hallstrom Pacific Collection'," Ms Stokes said.

"I am sure that scholars and the public alike will derive considerable professional and personal benefits from having access to the collection."