

# Strong, deep but not-so-silent type

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**I**N Australia's military history, there has been nothing quite like the story of the Royal Australian Navy's Collins class submarine. Not only was it the nation's largest and most ambitious defence project but, in true seafaring tradition, it has been a magnet for myth, legend and rumour.

More than a quarter of a century after the concept of a home-grown submarine force was conceived in the 1981 federal budget, the Collins submarines continue to divide opinion. The military sees them as a great Australian success story: the world's most lethal conventional submarine force which, after initial teething problems, has become one of the nation's most important defence assets.

Yet outside the barracks, in the court of public opinion, a polar opposite perception exists. "The general perception of the Collins class submarines is that they have been an enormously expensive disaster," Peter Yule and Derek Woolner write in *The Collins Class Submarine Story*. They go on to say that they

*have not encountered a single person without links to the military who has a positive view of their performance. Most people are convinced they are noisy and many people express surprise that they are still in service. Almost everybody recalls newspaper headlines such as "Dud subs" and "Noisy as a rock concert", and there is a universal belief that the project ran far over budget.*

The fact that such extreme and contrasting views about the submarines are held with such conviction is a story in itself. To date, few people have attempted to sort out myth from reality, and those who have tried have usually begun from a position of initial bias in favour or against and their conclusions ring hollow. The problem is compounded by the often excessive secrecy surrounding all aspects of the submarine fleet.

Into these dangerous waters have waded Yule and Woolner. Yule is a research fellow in the history department at the University of Melbourne and Woolner, a long-time defence buff, is a visiting fellow at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. Their book is much overdue; it is a heroic and surprisingly successful attempt to tell the true story of the Collins submarines, based on interviews with the main players. In doing so they debunk extreme views on both sides of the debate. They reveal that the problems during construction and early trials in the 1990s were real and serious, yet exaggerated by the media and politicians. And they show that public perception of these well-publicised problems remains frozen in time despite the submarines having long since proven their worth.

This could have been a boring book, a glorified engineer's manual, but despite occasionally wading into technical detail, the authors command our attention with a human drama of ambition, skulduggery and political intrigue:

*A unique and outstanding military and industrial achievement, the Collins class submarine project was also plagued with difficulties and mired in politics. Its story is one of heroes and villains, grand passions, intrigue, lies, spies and backstabbing. It is also a story of enormous commitment and resolve to achieve what many thought impossible.*

Indeed, as recently as the late '70s most people, even inside the defence community, did not expect Australia to attempt such an ambitious project as building its own submarine fleet. It flew in the face of history and a nagging sense of inferiority that held other countries could do it better, so why not just buy submarines from them, ready-made?

But the navy's British-built Oberon class

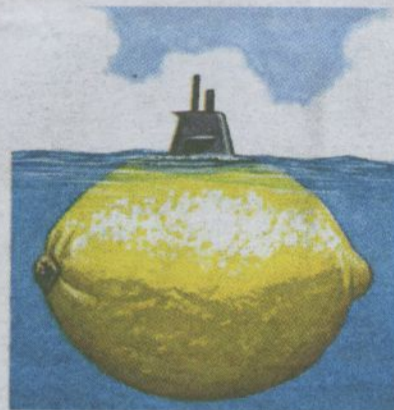


Illustration: Paul Newman

## The Collins Class Submarine Story: Steel, Spies and Spin

By Peter Yule and Derek Woolner

Cambridge University Press, 336pp, \$59.95 (HB)

submarines were ageing and in 1978 the director of submarine policy, Barry Nobes, prepared a brief on the need to replace them with a new fleet largely built in Australia. It was a radical idea and it may have sunk without trace but for the zealous efforts of a few individuals, most notably Australian engineering expert John White and German engineer Hans Orff. In the early '80s they put forward a persuasive argument that building submarines in Australia made strategic and economic sense. It would create jobs, new skills, technology transfers and an ongoing shipbuilding capability.

In 1984 White even converted John Halfpenny, the powerful left-wing national secretary of the Metal Workers Union and a peace activist, to the cause of a sustainable, home-grown defence industry. When Kim Beazley became defence minister in 1985, he moved to lock in the submarine project. He was a passionate believer in submarines, describing them as "the poor man's weapon to cause maximum angst to a bigger enemy". In May 1985, federal cabinet approved the historic project.

Suspicious minds were busy from the outset, with design bids by European companies sparking speculation that foreign spies might infiltrate the project. The surprise win by Swedish designer Kockums, over the more fancied German firm HDW, proved that the government was ambitious and willing to take risks, as Yule and Woolner write:

*They were not looking for a conservative risk-free design, but something at the leading edge of technology — not a production-line Volkswagen but a custom-made Ferrari.*

But problems soon emerged. As early as 1989, Australian officials visiting Sweden identified serious welding faults in parts being made for the first submarine, HMAS Collins. Grave mistakes had already been made in the design of the fully integrated combat system, which was being built separately. In hindsight, this system was fundamentally flawed. The problems went from bad to worse and by 1992 the system project was in disarray, with fears that it would not be ready in time for sea trials. Yet the government was determined to launch Collins as scheduled in August 1993. It was a charade of a submarine that was barely seaworthy. "The first launch was purely political," the commanding officer, Peter Sinclair, admits in this book.

Sea trials were almost scary, with the Collins, when diving, doing the opposite to what the crew had learned in the navy's submarine simulator. As Sinclair tells Yule and Woolner:

*The submarine ended up with the*

*propeller about 20 feet (6m) out of the water on her first dive. We quickly learned that the sequencing taught for opening the ballast tanks was different to the way the actual submarine reacted.*

During trials in 1994 Collins had a combat system that was barely functional for basic, safe ocean navigation, much less for hostilities. By 1995 the government's claims that all was fine began to ring hollow and media scrutiny helped snap the official line. Noise was a problem and media exposure of the claim that the submarines sounded like a rock concert underwater became, and remains, the most damaging and memorable public image of the project.

The second problem was not technical, but political. The election of the Coalition government in 1996 turned the subs into a political weapon. The new government derided them as "Beazley's baby", using the troubled project to undermine the new leader of the Opposition. Orff and others believed the new government was prepared to sink the project if it meant Beazley would go down with the ship.

In July 1999 the sense of crisis surrounding the project peaked with the release of the McIntosh-Prescott report, which identified a host of serious defects and concluded that there were basic deficiencies in the central design and manufacture of the boats. This was all the ammunition some in the government needed. But the new defence minister, John Moore, successfully argued that the submarines were worth saving. From that point, both sides of politics "owned" the submarines and there was a greater investment in fixing what had gone wrong. Early mistakes made in the building of HMAS Collins were rarely repeated in the later submarines and almost all the initial problems were ironed out. The significant exception was the combat system, which was abandoned and replaced. Yule and Woolner write:

*By far the most significant failure of the Collins class was the failure of the combat system. If it had been delivered on time and with the capabilities asked for by the navy and promised by the contractors, then the teething problems with the submarines would have been regarded as being normal for a "first of class".*

They add that the project was dysfunctional because

*in many ways the most serious issue ... was not the shortcomings of the submarines but the difficulty in reaching agreement on what the problems really were and who was responsible for fixing them.*

Further, the project "involved far more risks than were ever admitted, at least publicly, at the time the contracts were signed". But despite these risks and the genuine problems that emerged, the wrong conclusions were drawn:

*Not surprisingly the media and politicians mistook the cacophony of noise coming from the submarine project as showing that the submarines were seriously flawed.*

The authors argue, however, that the project has been a remarkable achievement of home-grown industry:

*Australia now has a type of submarine with a range, endurance and speed that cannot be matched by any other conventional submarine. That the accomplishment was marked by acrimony, controversy and bitterness perhaps simply reflects the magnitude of the project and the scale of the achievement. That there is a pervasive public perception of failure is an irony that the many people who dedicated years of their lives to the project find hard to comprehend. \**