CAMERON STEWART

The Collins Class Submarine Story: Steel, Spies and Spin

By Peter Yule and Derek Wooller

submarines were ageing and in 1987 the director of submarine policy, Barry Nobs, 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 Off. 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 shipping 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, homegrown 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 mayhem to a bigger enemy." In May 1985, federal cabinet approved the historic project.

Suspicious minds were by then out; 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 Wooller 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 was fundamentally flawed. The problems went from bad to worse and by 1992 the submarine 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 scuttled with Collins, when divers, doing the opposite to what the crew had been told in the navy's submarine simulator. As Sinclair tells Yule and Wooller.

"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 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 in May 1996 the government released 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 babies" using the troubled project to undermine the new leader of the Opposition. Off 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 mission and commitment the project peaked with the release of the Reid report, which identified a host of serious defects and concluded that there were basic deficiencies in the control design and manufacture. The report had the ammunition some in the government needed to press for a Disney-style "mod" of Collins. They 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.

For 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 keel laying problems with the submarines would have been regarded as being normal for a "first of class." They added 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 in secret despite these risks and the genuine problems that emerged, the wrong contracts were drawn. Not surprisingly the media and politicians took the canopic 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 homegrown 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 achievement was marked by acrimony, controversy and bickering, 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.