



Members of the Commonwealth Parliament with war service

Serving their country

It is a noteworthy aspect of the history of the various Australian parliaments that many of their members saw active service in times of war. The Commonwealth Parliament is no exception to this. In the case of Commonwealth MPs elected before 1970, a remarkably high percentage experienced war service—some before entering Parliament, some while they were members, and some after they had left the Parliament. Although the total number is uncertain,¹ at least 285 (18.5 per cent) of the total membership of the Parliament gave war service at some stage of their lives. Some of these served in more than one conflict.

The Parliamentary Library is aware of at least 14 MPs who served in colonial wars before Federation. At least 123 served in World War I—approximately one-third of the 1946–9 Parliament were WWI veterans. At least 169 MPs served in World War II—approximately half of the 1963–66 Parliament were WWII veterans (Fig. 1).

At least two MPs served in Korea and six in Vietnam. Senator Andrew Murray (AD, WA since 1996) served in the Rhodesian Air Force during the civil war of the 1970s.

At least 30 MPs participated in more than one conflict.

The number of MPs in Parliament with war service reached a peak between 1955 and 1969 with over half the Parliament during that time having some form of war service (Fig. 2). In fact, in the early 1960s there were still two Boer War (1899–1902) veterans in the Parliament—Donald Cameron (Senator, ALP, Vic 1938–62) and George Lawson (ALP, Brisbane 1931–61).

Figure 1 shows the approximate number of Commonwealth MPs with war service, and Figure 2 depicts the approximate percentage.

Among the many

As might be expected, the background and experience of MPs who served, varied greatly:

- Cyril Cameron (Senator, Protectionist, Tas 1901–03, 1907–13) took part in the march to Kandahar, 1880
- Stanley Bruce (Nationalist/United Australia, Flinders 1918–29, 1931–3) was wounded at Gallipoli, 1915
- Harold (Pompey) Elliott (Senator, Nationalist, Vic 1919–31) served in both the Boer War and WWI

- Ted Mattner (Senator, Liberal SA 1944–6, 1950–68) MC, DCM, MM, fought at the Somme, Pozieres, Bullecourt, Messines, Ypres and Menin Road.
- Fred Osborne (Liberal, Evans 1949–61) was a decorated naval commander in WWII
- John Gorton (Senator, Liberal, Vic 1949–68, Higgins 1968–75) RAAF pilot, was wounded in WWII
- Sir Wilfred Kent-Hughes (Liberal, Chisholm 1949–70), was captured in Malaya, and was a prisoner of war 1942–5
- Tom Uren (ALP, Reid, 1958–90) a prisoner of war 1942–5, worked on the Burma/Thailand Railway
- David Thomson (NCP, Leichhardt 1975–83), served in WWII, Japan after the war and Korea in 1951
- Graham Edwards (ALP, Cowan since 1998) lost his legs to a land mine in Vietnam, 1970.

Victoria Cross

- Neville Howse (Nationalist, Calare, 1922–9) won the Victoria Cross in South Africa in 1900 for heroism in rescuing a wounded comrade.

The ultimate sacrifice

Two MPs lost their lives in wartime action:

- William Johnson (ALP, Robertson, 1910–13) died of gunshot wounds, Etaples, France, 30 July 1916
- Arnold Wienholt (Nationalist/Country, Wide Bay 1919–22) served in the Boer War and WWI. He was assumed killed in action, Ethiopia, 10 September 1940

1. All figures are approximate due to the incompleteness of Parliamentary records.

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