
Editorial

Editorial – Military Speculative Fiction

In 1961, Edward Carr noted that ‘the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present, and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past’.¹ George Chesney’s story of the invasion of England in the *Battle of Dorking* (1871), one of the early attempts to predict the future of conflict, led to a major debate on the United Kingdom’s readiness for war and spawned a whole genre of foreordained and precautionary writings.² In 2015, August Cole and Peter Singer published *Ghost Fleet*, which outlined a conflict with China where the United States’ military forces were badly impacted because of their over-reliance on advanced technologies, vulnerability to weaponised satellites and unprepared for new threats to their supply chains.³ This picked up on many of the themes in Singer’s non-fiction work *Wired for War* (2009) on robotics and drone warfare in a highly effective way.⁴ The impact of the book was significant, despite some major weakness in its portrayal of China’s motives, with major interest from both military and civilian policymakers, growing recognition of the potential for war with China, reconsideration of some strategic vulnerabilities, and far greater penetration and influence in wider society than strategic policy papers.⁵

Australian Major General Mick Ryan’s book *White Sun War: The Campaign for Taiwan* (2023) takes the concept further, suggesting that ‘fiction is a superior tool for passing on knowledge and driving both learning and adaptation’.⁶ The novel is more realistic in its strategic, operational and tactical considerations, while extending the likely role of cyber and autonomous robotic systems.⁷ Ryan also draws

on his non-fiction work *War Transformed* (2022) to provide the theoretical basis for the novel.⁸ Through the novel, Ryan raises scenarios and questions that require further analysis and solutions, as they may influence how future military leaders and warfighters plan for coming conflicts, particularly between major military powers.⁹ Such military speculative fiction is designed to engage readers, highlight risks and vulnerabilities, and envision how emerging technologies and changing geopolitical and economic situations will influence the future of war.¹⁰ They also build on developmental work, such as fully autonomous robotic systems, and the challenges of operating with and against such systems.¹¹ While most speculative fiction does not address military health support, planning for the medical implications of such future conflicts remains critical.

Our third issue of 2025 contains a range of articles on diverse topics spanning special operations forces, naval medical history, mental health, and veterans’ health. We continue to attract a good range of articles, including from overseas, as is demonstrated in this issue. Other military and veterans’ health articles, however, are always very welcome, and we would encourage all our readers to consider writing on their areas of military or veterans’ health interest. We would particularly welcome papers based on presentations given at the Brisbane 2024 ICMM conference or planned for our 2025 conference but welcome any articles across the broader spectrum of military health.

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References

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- 3 Freedman, *The future of war*, 251-252.; August Cole and P. W. Singer, “Thinking the unthinkable with useful fiction,” *Journal of Future Conflict* 2 (2020): 5.
- 4 Peter Warren Singer, *Wired for war: The robotics revolution and conflict in the 21st century* (Penguin, 2009), 15.
- 5 Mark D. Jacobsen, “The Uses and Limits of Speculative Fiction: Three Novels about a US–China War,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6 (2023), 5.; Cole, “Thinking the unthinkable,” 5.; J. Furman Daniel III and Paul Musgrave, “Synthetic experiences: How popular culture matters for images of international relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017):512-513.
- 6 Jacobsen, “The Uses and Limits of Speculative Fiction,” 8.
- 7 Jacobsen, “The Uses and Limits of Speculative Fiction,” 8.
- 8 Richard Norton, “White Sun War: The Campaign for Taiwan,” *Naval War College Review* 77, no. 3 (2024): 182-183.
- 9 Norton, “White Sun War,” 184.
- 10 Jacobsen, “The Uses and Limits of Speculative Fiction,” 1.; Brent D. Ziarnick, “Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War,” *Air & Space Power Journal* 30, no. 1 (2016): 100.
- 11 David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* (William Collins, 2023), 416.