

# Combined-arms teams: Lessons from Iraq

T.E. Shaw

## At a glance ...

- The highest level acceptance of a combined-arms focus for the Army is a key milestone.
- In complex terrain, the shorter the engagement range, the less chance a Light Armoured Vehicle has of detecting, reacting to and surviving hostile fire.
- US forces in Iraq are using the M1 Abrams tank as the nucleus of their combined-arms teams.
- Of the two land components, the USMC is having more success than the US Army in its approach to combined-arms operations.

## Acknowledgement at last

In November 2003, when Defence Minister Robert Hill announced the revised Defence Capability Review (DCR), most commentators focused on the government's decision to purchase a quite limited number of new tanks. But a more important point escaped many in the broader audience. Hill said:

'The Government has accepted recommendations that will contribute to the Army becoming more sustainable and lethal in close combat. The government has in particular accepted the advice of the Chief of Army that the combined arms approach ... remains the best way of achieving rapid success while minimising friendly casualties.'

This statement represents formal and long overdue government recognition of combined-arms in close combat as the basis of Army capability. This is new and important, reflecting a new awareness by the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC), in approving the DCR. The present committee is, incidentally, the most experienced and capable this country has had in recent memory, with experience from overseeing two wars and several major operational commitments. This familiarity with the actual business of warfare and peace enforcement (as distinct from the arcane theories of the armchair strategists who dominated Australian defence thinking in the 1980s and most of the 1990s) arguably contributed to the NSCC's decision to accept the Chief of Army's advice.

Former governments, and Defence bureaucrats of various shades, have previously said that the Army 'prefers to fight in combine-arms teams'. As the government now appears to have acknowledged, saying the Army 'prefers' to fight in combined-arms teams is like saying the Navy 'prefers' to fight in ships. Combined-arms teams are not some optional preference for how the Army fights—they

are how all modern professional armies fight. There is no other viable alternative.

Combined-arms combat is not new. It has been the basis for land warfare for millennia: Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar were all masters of combined-arms combat. As explained in an unclassified Army concept paper recently quoted in the *Australian Financial Review*:

A combined-arms team is a case-by-case mix of combat, combat support and logistics elements, scaled and tailored to perform a specific mission in a given environment. The combined-arms philosophy institutionalises versatility, agility and orchestration: it accustoms individuals and teams to tailored, task-specific, agile mission groups that can be rapidly reorganised, regrouped and re-tasked as a situation develops. The principles of combined arms are complementarity, where the strengths of each arm cover the vulnerabilities of the others; and dilemma, where in avoiding one arm, the enemy is exposed to another.

In essence, you engage in land combat with a balanced force: a mix of elements that support each other, covering each other's weaknesses and exploiting each other's strengths. Where one element of this team is faulty, the whole team fails. By having one weak link in the combined-arms team you create a gap that the enemy can exploit, increasing your casualties and reducing your chances of success. This seems to have been the Army's argument to the NSCC—that a vulnerable tank, such as the aging 1970s-era Leopard AS1—is a weak link that brings the whole Army combined-arms team unstuck.

## The tank tantrum

With all this discussion already in the public domain, it is astounding that some commentators—funnily enough, usually those with the greatest stake in the now deservedly defunct Defence of Australia 'concentric circles' mythology—persist in misunderstanding or misrepresenting the thinking behind the tank decision. Consider this bizarrely ill-informed editorial from the *Canberra Times* of 11 March 2004:

Tanks ... have no conceivable purpose in the defence of continental Australia under any contingency ever imagined at Russell Hill ... Were an enemy of the sort needing to be fought with tanks able to reach a point in open country where Abrams tanks would be useful, Australia (and any allies it had) would necessarily have been defeated at sea and in the air, in which case the tank commanders would be better deployed practising their copperplate for surrender documents.

... Abroad in our neighbourhood, Australian soldiers would be greatly assisted by armour, but it is doubtful whether tanks

of this sort would add any great value beyond what is available from our existing stocks of several hundred light-armoured vehicles.

Such commentaries are humming traditional 1980s-style hymns of praise to the vaunted 'sea-air gap', the supposed logic of which—as anyone who was in the Army during the Dibb Ages could tell you—is that land forces are a waste of money and can safely be left to atrophy because the tyranny of distance is its own protection. The reality has been and is rather different. During the latter 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the much-run-down land forces conducted one offshore operation after another, including operational commitments as far afield as Bosnia and Africa.

The first paragraph of that *Canberra Times* piece entirely misses the point. The phrase 'in open country' is the give-away. The author seems to imagine the tanks being only used in sweeping, blitzkrieg-like battles against other tanks. As the Army must be getting tired of pointing out, this is not how the Army intends to use them. Instead, they will form part of a balanced combined-arms team, working in the confines of built-up, probably urbanised terrain, with infantry, engineers, artillery and other assets. There will be no tank-on-tank open country manoeuvre—rather, a hard slog in complex conditions against a fleeting but highly lethal enemy.

The second paragraph shows an even more stunted understanding of land warfare. Light armoured vehicles (LAVs) are completely different from tanks, and provide a completely different range of capabilities. LAVs are exactly what their name indicates—lightly armoured vehicles. They survive because they have excellent sensors, high speed and a rapid fire weapon system. In open country, this allows them to detect the enemy first, then either move away from the threat or destroy it at long range. In built-up terrain, where the Army mainly expects to fight, this survival mechanism breaks down. Because of the 'terrain clutter', the LAVs cannot detect the enemy from stand-off range, and their light armour—which grants them their high speed—becomes a fatal point of vulnerability if overmatched. They can be picked off at short range by snap-shots from handheld anti-armour weapons such as rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).

By contrast, tanks survive because of their excellent armoured protection. Unlike LAVs, which survive primarily by not being hit, tanks can survive being hit. In built-up terrain they can sit in a street, taking fire, without being destroyed or even significantly damaged. They can then decide to engage the enemy using extremely powerful sensors and a large precision gun, or can withdraw or move position. These are tasks (and tactics) for which the US Army and US Marine Corps (USMC) are using their M1 Abrams in the streets of Iraq every other day.

Just as importantly the combined arms concept is not just an Army or land-force concept—it is a joint, and even a whole-of-government one. Joint combined-arms teams,

including air and maritime assets as well as a balanced land force team, are the norm in modern conflict. Inter-agency teams—as seen in the Solomons, Timor and Bougainville—where the team includes non-military elements to perform specialist tasks, are also becoming increasingly common.

## Combined-arms combat in Iraq

The commentators who continue to reprove the Army's tank buy and other pending acquisitions and enhancements for the land force would do well to take a good look at exactly what is happening in Iraq today. Lightly armoured vehicles—LAVs and (lightly) 'armoured Humvees'—have proven to be death traps for US troops. The Iraqi insurgents ambush them from concealed positions at short range, picking them off with RPGs, booby traps, roadside mines and improvised explosive devices (IED). The LAVs usually don't detect the enemy until he actually opens fire, which is usually too late.

A typical pattern is for insurgents to ambush road columns as they turn a corner in an urban area. The last vehicle in the column becomes exceedingly vulnerable as it approaches the corner—earlier vehicles have turned the corner already, and cannot protect it. As it approaches the corner, the guerrillas pick it off with an RPG or, sometimes, by initiating an IED. It often takes

considerable time before the main body of the column becomes aware they have lost someone

and turns back to assist—giving the ambushers time to escape.

By contrast, during the entire combat operations phase of the Iraq war in March–April 2003, no unit equipped with M1 Abrams tanks lost a single soldier to enemy fire while inside a tank, although many tanks were damaged and some destroyed once they had been immobilised—often by short-range RPG fire directed at the vulnerable areas of the tank. Unlike LAVs, tanks can survive a surprise attack and then decide whether or not to hit back.

This highlights another advantage of tanks over LAVs in Iraq. If you are in complex terrain, full of civilian bystanders, fighting a fleeting but well-armed guerrilla enemy—and if you are in a LAV—you cannot allow the enemy to fire first, or you will die. So your only option is to shoot first and ask questions later. This is exactly what US forces have been accused of doing too often, resulting in frequent innocent civilian deaths and alienation of the local population. It is hardly coincidental that one of the field commanders' constant demands has been for more tanks.

The Australian Army concept paper, quoted earlier, draws no specific examples from current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But its authors seem to have taken current conditions into account. Indeed, they seem to have been mainly concerned with the sorts of complex, dirty, ambiguous little street-fights that the Australian Army believes will become increasingly common in the near

future. According to the paper, this complex operational environment—which the USMC call the ‘Three-Block War’ or Small Wars—will involve urbanised terrain, overlapping population groups, an information environment with close media scrutiny, and a need for frequent close combat as well as a diverse range of other tasks.

Even though the paper makes no mention of Iraq, it would be very surprising if key staff in Army Headquarters were unaware of the lessons being learned by forces in Baghdad and elsewhere, where the operating environment is a close copy of the scenario described in the paper.

The concept of combined-arms has been less than fully applied in Iraq. According to the recently released Strategic Survey 2003–2004, issued by the respected International Institute of Strategic Studies, US Army forces typically operate in fast-moving columns of armoured vehicles that tend to move quickly down the centre of main roads with infrequent stops, little or no supporting foot patrols, and no interaction with the local population. Their base areas tend to be well-fortified locations outside of major built-up areas, providing physical protection but little situational awareness. Indeed, the entire approach represents more of a ‘raiding’ than a patrolling style—a tendency that is leading some units into difficulty. For some troops, their lack of situational awareness leads to poor human intelligence, resulting in raids that fail to net their intended targets, alienate the local population and create additional

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casualties. What is counter-intuitive to some—although not to Australian and British forces—is that moving on foot, on a regular basis, through dangerous areas, leads to greater situational awareness, contributes to winning over local populations and ultimately is less dangerous than passing quickly through in an LAV or Humvee. Importantly, the USMC (which has always maintained a different approach from the US Army when it comes to counter-insurgency) has adopted a more combined-arms approach, with foot patrols supported by air and armoured assets, good intelligence and

capable civil affairs. There are even plans to re-establish the extremely successful Combined Action Platoons of the Vietnam era—small

teams that live in local neighbourhoods, raise and train local fighters to protect their areas, and coordinate intelligence and civil-affairs action to win over the population and keep them on side. All this is simply an extension of the twin principles of combined arms-complementarity and dilemma.

The use of balanced teams that can support each other and exploit fleeting opportunities, particularly in urbanised terrain and complex-operating environments, is the true basis for all effective land operations. It is particularly relevant to the types of conflict today’s ADF is getting involved in. It is highly encouraging to see that the government has finally acknowledged and understood this. It is about time others followed suit. ♦

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**(Letters cont’d from p. 7)**

Sir: The February issue of *Defence Brief* lamented the demise of the Defence and Industry Study Course. The DISC is indeed unwell but hopefully should recover.

The DISC has its roots in industrial mobilisation and can best be described as a course for managers majoring in the defence-industry relationship.

The importance of understanding the organisational cultures and sub-cultures involved in the defence-industry relationship cannot be over-emphasised. There are many cultural pairs involved: public sector–private sector, uniformed–civilian, federal–State, as well as Navy, Army, Air Force, Police and Emergency Services. These are represented within the 60:40, private sector–public sector participant mix on the course. Understanding and trust between individuals as fostered by the DISC are the basis of good relationships between organisations that enable the defence-industry relationship to operate smoothly and effectively.

As well as its program of lectures, seminars and visits the DISC is a mighty vehicle for networking. Participants also gain familiarity with Australia’s critical infrastructure and first-hand experience of the operating environment in Northern Australia.

The DISC can be improved by broadening its context to encompass the large additional areas that are now contracted to industry, not just acquisition but also corporate support, infrastructure and logistics. The mobilisation of certain sectors of industry to support the ADF during contingencies follows the outsourcing of support and increased reliance on reserves. Selective mobilisation of defence and industry should now be the prime focus of the course.

The evolved structure of the DISC as a part-time course run over a calendar year needs to be retained as it is fundamental to achieving cross-cultural understanding and is compatible with defence and corporate posting cycles.

The DISC needs to be refocused, revitalised and run in 2005. A new emphasis on selective—mobilisation could be reflected in a new name—the Defence and Industry Mobilisation Course. The outcome of the DISC is vital but intangible. Trust based on cross-cultural understanding, personal contact and friendship is the key to successful long-term strategic partnerships.

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