

The number of working journalists, columnists, pundits, television comperes and radio commentators in Australia with an acceptable professional knowledge of military matters is around a dozen or so. Most people working in the media know and acknowledge their limitations in this regard but not all do. At the end of May Australians were able to observe two spectacular examples of uninformed media reporting of Australian defence issues.

The interview of the ADF's commander in Dili, Brigadier Mick Slater, by television breakfast-show host, Jessica Rowe, received much publicity for the shallowness of her questioning and Slater's crushing response.

The rival Seven-network delightedly rebroadcast this exchange for the rest of that day. But their breakfast show host, David Koch, had said an even sillier thing the day before during a live interview with the Reverend Tim Costello. When Costello complained about the ADF supposedly not protecting the activities of his NGO (an incident subsequently shown to be the fault of the NGO), Koch, on the hop, told him that this was disgraceful and that the program would ring the Minister for Defence and get it fixed.

The Rowe incident attracted widespread public derision but her producers and researchers were equally to blame for the poor questions and the clumsy stage management of the backdrop in Dili. She also apologised immediately. Koch's more individual failure attracted less general public notice but considerably more scorn and professional outrage from ADF personnel. This was no doubt widely shared among those Australians who understand military matters, international affairs and how ADF command and control actually needs to work.

The stupidity of the belief by television breakfast-show hosts, that they can task elements of the defence force deployed on overseas operations, is exceeded only by the idiocy of their misplaced confidence that they know enough to do so and should be able to. The apparent failure of Koch's co-host or producers to even notice his gaffe only reinforces this judgement. But such misplaced confidence and ignorance when tackling defence issues is not just confined to television comperes. More dangerously, it is common among real journalists.

With the accident that befell Private Jake Kovko, much silly and indeed hurtful media speculation was caused by no-one knowing the many variables you would need to know before usefully speculating. Nor did a deep lack of knowledge of firearms, infantry tactical procedures, the situation in Baghdad specifically and battlefield accidents in general, to name just a few, provide any obstacle to an avalanche of ill-informed and pointless speculation. Little and often no thought was given to the additional grief this needlessly caused the Kovko and Small families and their friends.

Later, radio commentator Derryn Hinch even broadcast excerpts of an uncompleted draft report into the debacle surrounding the repatriation of Private Kovko's body. Hinch could, of course, have made his point about the inexcusable military bungling involved without needing to broadcast

contents

Comment and Information

Leading Article	1
Letters	2
Current Comment	6
Major Furphy	11
The Sharp End	34
Association Update	24
Conference Calendar	24
Subscriptions and Privacy Policy	10

Articles

Defence Budget 2006/07: Planning on Hope or Pessimism <i>Mark Thomson</i>	12
Australia's Vulnerabilities <i>Michael O'Connor</i>	19
Japan: Strategic Isolation Redux <i>Robyn Lim</i>	25
The International Context of Islamist Terrorism <i>Peter Varghese</i>	30
Like a Jewelled Watch <i>Bill Bridges</i>	34
High Time for the High-readiness Reserve <i>Hugh Smith</i>	35

Reviews

To Villers-Bretonneux: With Brigadier-General William Glasgow, DSO and the 13th Australian Infantry Brigade <i>Neil James</i>	38
Saving Australia: Curtin's Secret Peace with Japan <i>Michael McKernan</i>	39
The Quiet Man: The Autobiography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara <i>Brendan Roberts</i>	40
A Different Sort of War: Australians in Korea 1950-53 <i>Peter Edwards</i>	41
The Cambridge History of Warfare and The Oxford History of Modern War <i>Peter Dennis</i>	42
America's Coming War with China: A Collision Course over Taiwan <i>Tom Frame</i>	44

Our cover

Federal policeman Peter Gritsch and Private Cliff Inches from 3RAR patrol the streets of Dili.

Photo courtesy DOD

detail from the report. Many Australians no doubt found it even more disturbing that previously reputable journalists defended Hinch's actions, even to the extent of claiming not to notice any ethical, professional or bad taste problem.

On operations, based on long experience, the military traditionally worry that accompanying journalists might put personal aggrandisement and the quest for a scoop above the safety, security and operational success of those they accompany. Their fears are reinforced when inexperienced or egocentric journalists claim that common-sense operational security considerations are merely 'censorship'.

The media should assume nothing, report the facts and not give opinions, especially ones based on biased or mistaken assumptions. Questioning should enable viewers, listeners and readers to form their own conclusions. The disappointing, and at times disgraceful, standard of recent media coverage of defence issues will do nothing to allay the natural friction between the professions of arms and journalism. ♦