

Like a Jewelled

Watch

Bill Bridges

*Amphibious operations must fit together like
a finely jewelled watch*

Winston Churchill

On the evening of Wednesday 24 May 2006 the East Timorese authorities formally requested Australian assistance to restore order in their troubled country. The Australian Government responded immediately. By the time the order came, the ADF had been preparing for Operation ASTUTE for several days. A 4RAR (Commando) company group was flown into Dili the very next day, with a 3RAR company and two M113 APC following swiftly. But it was not until Monday 29 May that the main force, based on a 3RAR battalion group with its vehicles, was complete on the ground. Whether this response was quick or slow depends on your perspective. It seemed slow to some Australian and international media observers, and to many desperate East Timorese, given that the ADF had been preparing for some weeks and was not exactly unfamiliar with deploying to East Timor.

Rapid deployments to assist regional nations are the ADF's bread and butter. They are central to three of the five strategic defence objectives set by Government: defending the immediate approaches, stability of the immediate neighbourhood and the stability of South-East Asia. *Defence Update 2005* makes clear the dangers that failed states present as potential havens for international crime and terrorism. East Timor, the Solomons and Fiji have already featured in this agenda to varying degrees. It does not take much imagination to think of other regional nations with highly questionable governance and high risks of pervasive and prolonged instability.

Although the lead elements in our regional assistance operations have usually been deployed by air, in permissive circumstances, the bulk of the force has always arrived by sea and has frequently been delivered across a beach rather than into a port. In other words these deployments are amphibious operations. It is no coincidence that many of our regional operations in World War II were also amphibious. This is a simple result of the archipelagic geography of our immediate region.

If any country in the world needs to develop an amphibious mindset it is Australia. Paradoxically, however, Australia is one of very few maritime nations without a standing, integrated, amphibious force. This is such an obvious point that it is surprising that the otherwise excellent Joint Parliamentary Committee report *Australia's Maritime Strategy* missed it completely.

Australia's success to date in a series of recent operations in the region might suggest that such a force is unnecessary. We have proven we can embark Army ground and aviation elements into Navy ships and get them to where they need to go. The essential point is that we have only ever done this in permissive circumstances with ample warning. These optimal and fortunate circumstances are not guaranteed but have led

to a dangerous level of complacency in defence and wider strategic decision-making circles.

Consider a scenario where Australia was asked to respond immediately to an ethnic conflict on an island a little further out in the region than conveniently proximate East Timor. Any local militia or faction with the slightest imagination and initiative could deny the main airfield and port. They could not, however, effectively defend every possible beach or potential helicopter landing-site. Stretching the enemy by deceptive manoeuvre, then exploiting the resultant opportunities is what amphibious operations in archipelagic waters are all about, not storming ashore into the teeth of enemy fire. The idea is to land where there is no or only minimal opposition.

The success of this type of operation depends on speed and surprise. This means we can establish a sufficiently robust presence at critical locations ashore before local forces can retaliate against vulnerable civilians, NGOs and Australian expatriates. Achieving this sort of cross-environmental tactical agility is demanding. There are so many interdependent moving parts that Churchill's analogy with a jewelled watch is, if anything, an understatement.

In our hypothetical scenario, the consequences of a delayed H-hour or a stutter in the offload sequence are potentially fatal to achieving the mission. Australian forces do not currently have the skills to pull it off, and under our existing force structure and command arrangements will never develop them.

We would not ask non-specialist forces to plan and conduct a hostage recovery in Australia. We have specially trained and equipped Tactical Assault Groups for that. The consequences of non-specialist troops failing in our hypothetical amphibious scenario are an order of magnitude worse.

Prior to Operation ASTUTE, our three amphibious ships had never operated together and none of them had operated with what turned out to be their landing force. This contributed, arguably, to a little tardiness with the deployment but putting that force into our more distant, less permissive scenario practically guarantees failure.

The Government needs to decide whether or not the ADF needs a serious regional amphibious manoeuvre capability. The answer is self-evident. If the ADF is to be tasked with achieving national strategic objectives then an ability to deploy in its own timescale to serviceable ports and airfields in permissive circumstances does not cut the mustard. Not by a long way. Australia's Rapid Deployment Force should be a properly organised and trained, standing, joint amphibious force.

In our archipelagic region nothing less makes sense. ♦

Bill Bridges is a nom de plume for a serving Army officer.