

Perspective and sense

Recently there was a flurry of comment concerning some inappropriate video clips being posted on the Internet by diggers who had served in Iraq, and on the slightly differing reactions of the Service Chiefs and the Government to these clips. There is no doubt that some of the clips were in bad taste and some showed very lax and unprofessional weapon handling.

But to put this matter in proper perspective, whatever the diggers did it pales into insignificance compared to the video clips of the Islamist extremists we are fighting. Our enemies behead captives on the Internet and cut their throats on Satellite TV. Moreover, surely the most disturbing Australian image to come out Iraq so far was that of the very well-paid, former AWB Chairman, Trevor Flugge, naked to the waist and lolling back on his bed brandishing a revolver. ♦

Kovco inquiry rockets

As expected, Shelley Kovco gave her final evidence to the inquiry into her husband's death with all the dignity and commonsense she has shown through her long ordeal. The report of the inquiry is expected later this year. It is to be hoped that the report will lay this sad saga to rest once the appropriate findings and recommendations are meted out.

The report will hopefully also include appropriate conclusions and recommendations about the disgraceful standard of media reporting that has unnecessarily increased the anguish of the Kovco and Small families, and even worse, greatly insulted them at times. Some of this has even been caused by supposed 'defence correspondents' and those concerned seem oblivious to all shame on this matter so far. Perhaps being named as professionally deficient and grossly insensitive by the Board of Inquiry might finally give them sufficient cause to stop and think.

It is also hoped that the report will make strong recommendations concerning the apparently poor weapon handling culture in the rifle company concerned, and the apparent lapses in command, supervision and discipline involved. The evidence to the inquiry in this regard has been met with outright astonishment among generations of professional infantrymen. ♦

Resuscitating the Armed Forces Federation

The ADF's representative body, the Armed Forces Federation of Australia (ArFFA), is facing imminent collapse due to declining membership and frail but well-intended leadership. ArFFA was founded in 1984, largely as a result of the ADF being the only part of Australian society to endure a four-year wage freeze during the last years of the Fraser Government and the first years of the Hawke one. Since then, under governments of both political persuasions, ArFFA has quietly worked away and achieved much, invariably in the background, by its detailed and independent submissions to the Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal (DFRT) – a body, incidentally, that ArFFA helped create by its insistence on a more independent and objective means for determining what ADF personnel deserved to be paid.

The constitution and methods of ArFFA were modelled on those of the old State police associations and not those of a trade union. ArFFA has always only made representations directly at the national level and never at unit or local area levels (no matter how indirectly). There is deliberately no provision for strikes or similar industrial action under the ArFFA constitution. Claims over the years by some ADF personnel that they have not joined because they 'thought ArFFA was a union', simply portray the gross ignorance of the members concerned – or is an excuse to cover complacency, apathy or ingratitude about the salary levels and conditions of service that ArFFA helps secure and protect.

The membership of ArFFA has always been disproportionately concentrated at the corporal-equivalent to major-equivalent level but even the membership at these ranks has declined. The overall problem is that ArFFA has become a victim of its early successes, the short-term individual and collective memories of ADF personnel and their growing complacency. There are few now serving who remember the prolonged neglect of ADF salaries and conditions throughout the late 1970s and 1980s that spurred the need to form ArFFA as a pressure group to secure reform. ADF members of all ranks have grown complacent, and wrongly believe that the salaries and conditions of service they now have were achieved without great effort by, among others, ArFFA, and that these benefits can be preserved without commensurate effort.

If ArFFA collapses the men and women of the ADF will long rue the day. In a situation where the 'system' is uniquely both the employer and also the representative of the employees, there must always be an independent body representing ADF personnel to monitor and contribute to the deliberations of the DFRT and other bodies. Either that or most members of the ADF must think they are paid too much.

This is ultimately a simple leadership issue. Those officers, senior NCO and senior sailors who have never joined ArFFA, nor encouraged their junior ranks to do so, have failed to adequately consider what being a leader in the modern ADF entails. ArFFA's first president was a brigadier. Its current president is a warrant officer. Maybe senior officers were braver or angrier in the mid 1980s. While nationwide changes in employment law have played their part in the federation's decline, the failure of any ADF officer to currently lead ArFFA is a shocking indictment on the ADF officer corps as a body and its members individually.

The hierarchy of the ADF will also rue the day if ArFFA folds because of its undoubted value in independently highlighting issues to Ministers, and to the Defence bureaucracy, that the hierarchy cannot or often fear to air themselves (for whatever reasons). In November 2001 the then Head DPE (now Chief of Navy) rightly awarded ArFFA a certificate of appreciation 'in recognition of the organisation's past and continuing contribution in support of members of the Australian Defence Force.' Yet this support from ArFFA is not really reciprocated. As but one example, ArFFA is not even allowed to address the course at the new joint Command and Staff College each year to dispel myths and explain what it is, how it helps and why mid-level officers in the ADF need to consider assisting by joining and where necessary leading. ♦