

# We were soldiers once:

## The decline of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps

Jim Hammett

### Situation

The Royal Australian Regiment has been conducting operations continuously since the first intervention in East Timor in 1999. These operations have spanned a variety of theatres and comprised of a variety of missions. This period of operations is frequently cited as evidence of our professionalism, leadership and ability, and as cementing Australia's place as a regional leader and putative global ally. Beyond dispute is the fact that the Army, and in particular the infantry, have been busier and deployed overseas more often and more widely than at any time since the Vietnam War. The current cycle of operations does not appear to be losing momentum; and the recent Enhanced Land Force (ELF) initiatives that implement the raising of two new infantry battalions prove beyond doubt that the Corps of Infantry is certainly a growth industry.

Across the infantry's ranks, however, there is a common theme that is constantly being discussed, debated and passionately argued in messes, barracks, training establishments and generally anywhere that infantrymen cross paths and engage in professional discourse: What is the future of the Infantry Corps? Has the specific role that is unique to the Infantry Corps been assigned elsewhere? Why, in an era of global operations and unity of purpose against common enemies, are Australian infantrymen conspicuously absent from the fighting, whilst our allies are engaging in sustained combat operations?

The purpose of this article is to introduce the ubiquitous concerns of serving infantrymen into a wider arena for further debate. It will examine the reasons underpinning a growing perception that we will never perform our stated role; with the result that our collective psyche is being weakened by frustration, conflicting institutional stressors and a growing belief that the Infantry Corps is rated as a distant second choice for combat operations behind the special operations forces.

### Combat indicators?

The growing sense of professional frustration borne by the Corps has, until recently, been subordinated by discipline, institutional loyalty and adherence to the motto of the Royal Australian Regiment—*Duty First*. The current generation of infantrymen, despite their youth, are well aware of the

'barren years'; some two and a half decades of peacetime soldiering and exercises that was the lot of the Army between Vietnam and the 1999 deployment of INTERFET to East Timor. Certainly, the Infantry Corps has benefited from recent operational experience, however the Corps has yet to be called on to demonstrate its full potential or capability in performance of its primary role, namely seeking out the enemy and engaging in close combat.

There are indicators that the feelings of angst prevalent within the Infantry Corps have festered to the point of public dissent and critical questioning of the Corps *raison d'être*. This is reflected not only by questions posed to our leadership (including the Minister for Defence and the Chief of Army) across three theatres of operation, but also by recent articles published in the mainstream media. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence would suggest that disillusionment regarding the employment and future of the Infantry Corps has been a significant contributing factor to the discharge of personnel from the Corps.

### An Army at war?

The majority of Australian infantrymen would disagree with Chief of Army Lieutenant General Peter Leahy's statement that 'we are an Army at war'. Elements of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are engaged in combat operations, however the Army as an entity is not. Mobilised, yes—at war, no. It is understood and accepted across the Corps that Australia's strategic interests and objectives will entail the conduct of lower intensity operations in pursuit of our political objectives. It is also accepted that the ADF is not capable of, nor tasked with, conducting high-intensity conventional warfighting on much of a scale.

The contribution to offensive, warlike operations on the ground has, since 2001 consisted primarily of 'niche capabilities' which, in lay terms, translates to the deployment of Special Forces. An examination of both the role of the Infantry and the role of Special Forces, in comparison to the nature of employment of both on recent operations, provides an insight into one of the causes of the current discontent within the Infantry Corps.

The longstanding role of the infantry is *to seek out and close with the enemy, to kill or capture them, to seize and*

*hold ground and to repel attack by day and night, regardless of season, weather or terrain.* This role is unambiguous.

The specific and detailed roles of Special Forces remain subject to security classifications; however it is openly acknowledged they are tasked with ‘the conduct of operations that have strategic consequences at the national level’. This role is vague, and implies that the rest of the army is only capable of achieving tactical effects – an inference that is at odds with not only the strategic soldier concept, but also implies that the ‘wider army’ is incapable of implementing the effects defined in LWD 1, the Army’s capstone doctrine manual. Amplification of the role of Special Forces however, is provided elsewhere by further definition of the types of special operations:

SASR conduct a wide range of special operations beyond the scope and capability of other ADF elements. This includes rescuing personnel, unconventional warfare, information operations, and environmental, offensive and close-target reconnaissance. The commandos undertake offensive operations, including raids, recovery operations and support operations that cannot be performed by ‘conventional ADF forces’.

Amongst their other roles, Special Operations Forces are now tasked with a function titled ‘Direct Action’. In the absence of an ADF definition, US doctrine defines direct action as ‘short duration strikes that are used when Special Forces want to seize, capture, recover or destroy enemy weapons and information or recover designated personnel or material’.

Clearly there is the potential for overlap of the two roles, particularly with regard to the effects provided by ‘Direct Action’. Has the defined caveat of ‘short duration’ and ‘small scale actions’ evolved into a Special Forces-generated mission creep that usurps the role of the Infantry? A history of recent deployments would indicate so:

The infantry have not been tasked with conducting offensive action since Vietnam; Special Forces have been engaged in combat operations almost continuously since 2001. When comparing the role of the Infantry with that of Special Operations Forces (SOF), in contrast to the nature of deployments, the logical deduction is that either the role of the infantry is now defunct, or that only SOF are considered capable of the role.

‘This cult of special forces is as sensible as to form a Royal Corps of Tree Climbers and say that no soldier, who does not wear its green hat with a bunch of oak leaves stuck in it should be expected to climb a tree’, noted Field Marshall Sir William Slim in his book *Defeat into Victory*. Slim was remarkably

prophetic when he cautioned against the inclination to consider some tasks capable of being fulfilled by Special Forces only. The parallels between Slim’s ‘Royal Corps of Tree Climbers’ analogy and the current trend of operational deployments accurately summarise the frustrations of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, who, despite the lack of a ‘green hat’ (or possibly Sherwood Green or ‘Sandy’ beret), consider themselves more than capable of ‘climbing trees’.

## Can the infantry do the job?

The Infantry Corps is better equipped than ever before with world-class firepower, communications and protective equipment. The emphasis on infantry specialist and career courses (as well as Army’s All-Corps Officer Training Continuum courses) has, for many years, been dedicated to complex warfighting. The School of Infantry’s Initial Employment Training (rifeman) course has recovered from the training constraints and minimalist approach of the mid 1990s and is producing robust, competent soldiers whose basic training surpasses that of their forebears. The Infantry Regimental Officers’ Basic Course has evolved from the lacklustre attendance course of ten days duration to a twelve-week regimen that truly prepares infantry officers for the full spectrum of conflict. The Combat Training Centre has matured and routinely provides world class training to prepare sub-units and units for combat operations. The Centre for Army Lessons provides real-world lessons based on the current operations of other armies. Joint exercises are regularly conducted with coalition allies, with an emphasis on warfighting. The ADF, and the infantry in particular, have never before been at such a collective level of readiness for combat operations. It could be argued that the Infantry Corps, in relation to warfighting operations, is over-trained yet under-experienced.

The US, British and Canadian militaries have employed their ‘regular’ infantry in combat operations without hesitation in Iraq or Afghanistan, and sometimes both, since the conflicts in those countries commenced. A very small percentage of Australian infantrymen have participated in such operations through exchange postings. Anecdotal evidence provided by these individuals indicates that there is nothing that the British are doing in Basrah, Maysan or Helmand provinces that an Australian infantry battalion could not do equally as well. These opinions have been proven by the recent actions of Australian infantrymen in Afghanistan, who have on several recent occasions, in the course of their

THEATRE	ROLE OF INFANTRY	ROLE OF SPECIAL FORCES
East Timor INTERFET	Security and stability.	Offensive Response
East Timor UNTAET	Stability and support.	Offensive Response.
Afghanistan 2001–2006	Did not deploy	Offensive Manoeuvre
Iraq War	Did not deploy	Offensive Manoeuvre
Iraq SECDET	Force Protection	N/A
Iraq AMTG	Force Protection	N/A
Iraq OBG(W)	Force Protection	N/A
East Timor 2006-2007	Stability and support	Offensive Response and Manoeuvre
Afghanistan 2007	Force Protection	Offensive Manoeuvre

protective duties, engaged in battle against enemy-initiated offensive action—and been resoundingly successful.

## What did YOU do in the war daddy?

Tantalus, of Greek mythology, was deliberately tormented by the gods—he was immersed up to his neck in water, yet every time he bent his head to drink, it drained away; a variety of fruit hung above and around him, but every time he reached for it the winds would blow the branches beyond his reach. The frustrating nature of operations conducted by Australian infantry in both Iraq and Afghanistan are akin to the predicament that beset Tantalus.

In Iraq, SECDET has a purely force protection mission largely confined to Baghdad's 'Green Zone' and protective task outside it. In Southern Iraq, the role of the deployed battlegroup (whose manoeuvre elements consisted of only one infantry company and one ASLAV-equipped cavalry squadron), evolved from providing force protection to Japanese engineers to adopting the role of Overwatch Battle Group (West). This organisation remained subject to significant limitations regarding freedom of manoeuvre due to force protection policies. It was not deployed on an intervention task since assuming that role, despite periodic local defeats of Iraqi Security Forces and the loss of Iraqi Government control; most notably in An Nasiriyah during the period 17–19 June 2007, but also in Al Muthanna province.

Notwithstanding recent combat actions performed by infantrymen in Afghanistan, the role of the infantry component of the Reconstruction Task Force is limited to force protection—rigidly imposed to the point whereby participants have been required to sign formal documents declaring that they have not provoked exchanges of fire. Meanwhile, their fellow countrymen from the Special Operations Task Group actively pursue engagement with enemy forces, having been publicly praised by the Defence and governmental hierarchy for previous tours of duty that involved daily contact with the enemy. In the same theatre, armies with whom we possess a standardisation program (USA, Britain and Canada) are employing their infantry aggressively against the enemy. The lack of Australian participation in combat has drawn adverse comment and questions from the international press.

In East Timor, the mission of the resident infantry battalion is to conduct stability and support operations, and to provide support to UN Police as a tiered response to disorder. In this theatre alone the infantry does have the freedom of action to conduct manoeuvre at will, however whilst this allows refinement and development of procedures and techniques, there exists no enemy against which to provide quantifiable analysis. The actions of Reinado and his petitioners in February and March 2007 did initially present as an opportunity for the infantry to perform their primary role. The deployment of a Special Forces task group to assume this task resulted in the infantry once again being subordinated to conducting very minor support roles at the periphery of the battlespace.

## I'm an Australian soldier

The restrictions placed on deployed elements as a result of force protection and national policies have, at times, made our infantrymen ashamed of wearing their regimental hat badge and Australian uniform. Today's Australian soldiers have been imbued with the proud history of their forebears—their fighting spirit, their tenacity, their battle honours. The past achievements of Australian infantrymen are acclaimed across the military community: barracks are named after famous battles, bases are named after famous commanders, and battle honours are commemorated annually by the current generation. The infantrymen of today *want* to be proud of their own actions. The Army's emphasis on history and recognition of past achievements has inculcated into today's soldier a subconscious need to uphold the traditions forged by his predecessors – and an aspiration to overcome the unique challenges that are presented only in the arena of combat.

Since 11 September 2001 Australia's allies have become embroiled in violent conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia. Australia has professed itself a staunch ally of the Americans in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and indeed has received significant political kudos for what has been termed by senior American officials as 'unwavering support'. At the coalface, however, such sentiments are dismissed as political rhetoric, as serving members from the USA, Britain and Canada lay their lives on the line in support of their government's objectives whilst Australian infantry appear to do little more than act as interested spectators from the sideline.

Notwithstanding the mutual accolades provided between international political bodies in the interests of diplomacy, Australia's contributions to both Iraq and Afghanistan have been derided and scorned by soldiers and officers alike from other nations who are more vigorously engaged in combat operations. In Iraq, the much heralded deployment of the first Al Muthanna Task Group was met with incredulity by British forces deployed on Operation TELIC V. Stringent force protection measures and limitations to manoeuvre applied to the newly arrived (yet very well-equipped) Australians. These were in stark contrast to the British approach of using the benign Al Muthanna province as a respite locality for (not very well-equipped) troops who had been in sustained action in either Basra or Al Amarah.

The initial caution with such a deployment is both prudent and understandable, however the ongoing inaction and lack of contribution to counter-insurgency and offensive operations has resulted in collective disdain, and at times near contempt, by personnel from other contributing nations for the publicity-shrouded yet force-protected Australian troops.

The restrictions and policies enforced on our infantrymen in Iraq have resulted in the widespread perception that our army is plagued by institutional cowardice. Rebuttal of such opinions is difficult when all staff at Iraq's Multi-National Division (South East) Headquarters were formally briefed that the Australian contingent's national caveats strictly prohibited offensive operations, attack and pursuit. Of the phases of war, this leaves only defence and withdrawal.

## Core activity...

The Chief of Army recently defined his expectations of what defines the Australian soldier by virtue of nine *core behaviours* that have been established as aspirational benchmarks. Within the statement of these behaviours, the terms 'close combat', 'close-quarter combat', 'unarmed combat', 'complex warfighting', 'battle' and 'war' appear regularly. These are terms that clearly indicate to every infantryman that they should prepare themselves for such environments, as the core behaviours imply that the rigours of battle are, if not routinely experienced by the Army, then certainly to be expected.

But is the concept of Australian infantry joining battle a realistic expectation? Despite the promulgation of *core behaviours* designed to better prepare modern soldiers for complex warfighting and close-quarter combat, these functions do not appear in the Chief of Army's intent for the *Hardened and Networked Army*:

Army must be prepared to face a very broad range of activities from the conventional defence of Australia to peacekeeping to peace-making to nation-building to humanitarian operations and the threat of terrorism.

Within the intent of the *Hardened and Networked Army*, and the specified functions that the Army is to prepare for, the terms 'close combat', 'close-quarter combat', 'unarmed combat', 'complex warfighting', 'battle' and 'war' are conspicuous by their absence.

What, therefore, is the primary core activity of the Army as a whole? Is it force protection and avoidance of exposure to the enemy? A stated aim of the *Hardened and Networked Army* implementation is to 'provide as many soldiers as possible—whether from the combat arms or the support elements – with a seat in an armoured protected vehicle'. The refutation of such an ambition as being potentially flawed is certainly the domain of another forum, however as stated, the desired endstate does not auger well for the future employment of the infantryman. The 'Alcyoneus principle' as it would apply in the Australian context appears doomed, unless perhaps the aim is to ultimately dislocate opposing forces by not accepting engagement.

## Future operations....?

Today's Army projects the image, at least on the Web, of an operationally experienced, 'battle savvy' organisation with an emphasis on complex warfighting and close-quarter combat. Certainly there are within the ranks of the infantry numerous personnel who are veterans of multiple operations; however the majority of the infantry's collective experience applies only to the lower strata of the spectrum of conflict. Our experience is limited to that which can be gained from participation in operations charged with security and stability tasks in benign environments, or force protection roles in the more active areas of operations. In an unprecedented era of Infantry and Army Combat Badges, the fact remains that, since Vietnam, Australian infantrymen have been involved in little more than fleeting contacts or brief skirmishes with an enemy; none of them planned, none of them deliberate.

In the opinion of many infantrymen, the lauding of their contributions to recent operations does not ring true. Soldiers of all Corps perform as well as they can on operations; they are constrained by their mission and tasks, however. Why

do people join the Corps of Infantry? The answer is simple: to fulfil the role of the infantry; or to use simpler terms, to fight. But our infantry are not fighting; they are trained to fight, equipped to fight, and being indoctrinated to expect to fight—they are doing many other things, but not fighting. That function is being mainly fulfilled by Special Forces.

The Government of Australia (both before and after the 2007 election) has demonstrated the political will to commit troops to combat, and on numerous occasions has warned the public to expect casualties. There appears to be no reluctance on the part of the Government for forces to seek out and close with the enemy. But why have such roles been allocated only to Special Forces? One deduction that may be made is that Army itself does not consider the infantry capable of the job, and trusts only the ability of Special Forces.

Is the current trend going to continue? While our counterparts from allied nations are desperately fighting tenacious enemies in two theatres, will Australian infantry continue to be limited to supporting roles only – and be allowed freedom of action only in theatres that are devoid of a real enemy? Despite being trained, prepared and equipped for a role, that role remains elusive. If the status quo is maintained, it is not unlikely that our infantry will become denuded of the very type of soldier it requires, for while some will be lured to Special Forces, many more will demonstrate their discontent by seeking transfer or discharge. Moreover, how will we be able to sustain our Special Forces if there is not a large pool of well-trained, motivated and experienced infantry that the SF can draw on?

Have we entered an era that will foreshadow the decline of the Infantry Corps as the Army's fighting arm? Have the higher echelons of Special Forces shaped contemporary military and political thinking to the point where they alone are considered combat capable? The Infantry Corps desperately hopes not, but many within its ranks suspect that the role of the infantry has already been consigned to history. ♦

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