



Hardening the army and the refutation

Once upon a time there was a large but sparsely populated Commonwealth country whose traditionally neglected and largely light-scales Army had only just a hundred or so obsolescent Leopard-1 main battle tanks (MBT). For many years the Army had tried to have these 1970s-era tanks modernised or replaced without success. Finally, on the cusp of the 21st Century the Government embraced the idea of scrapping them instead and replacing the Army's small heavy armoured capability entirely with a smaller and lighter-scale force of 66 Stryker mobile 105mm gun systems (based on the LAV-3 wheeled chassis). Received wisdom in political, bureaucratic and academic circles was that even the few tanks the Army still held were no longer required. The fad for lighter, supposedly more mobile (and very conveniently much cheaper) armoured vehicles held full sway. Sceptics of this decision were derided as simply old-fashioned or recalcitrant dinosaurs – despite many of them actually knowing one end of a tank from the other and understanding what even a limited armoured capability meant for success in battle and reduced casualties.

Lo and behold, under three years later, the same Commonwealth country was suddenly confronted with the urgent operational need to protect its lightly-armoured mechanised-infantry forces operating in a low intensity war in southern Afghanistan. The type of operation, incidentally, not envisaged or even accepted as possible by the proponents of the Stryker option, despite the country's long history of short-notice crises requiring the swift deployment of an inadequately equipped defence force.

The interim solution employed was to deploy a 17-strong squadron of its Leopard-1 MBTs into the overseas theatre using USAF C-17 heavy airlifters. The ageing tanks were immediately successful in reducing casualties and extending the scope, range and duration of military operations. They were, however, limited by their age and technology, such as the lack of electric rather than hydraulic systems, and air-conditioning, needed to cope with Afghanistan's high Summer temperatures and dusty conditions.

In mid April 2007, therefore, comprehensive medium and longer-term solutions were implemented. The previous but now thoroughly disproven notion of replacing the whole 125-strong tank force with 66 Stryker mobile gun systems was scrapped. It was now quite clear that the Strykers would not be heavy enough, protected enough and capable enough for the battles being fought. American experience from Iraq was drawing similar lessons.

Instead 100 surplus Leopard-2 MBTs are being purchased from the Netherlands to finally replace the Leopard-1s. A further 20 modern Leopard-2A6 MBTs are being borrowed from Germany for immediate use in Afghanistan by Lord Strathcona's Horse, the Canadian tank regiment concerned. ●

Highlights:

- Canadian experience in Afghanistan dispels tankophobia
- More old lessons relearnt in current wars
- Big lessons for ADF from recent roadside bomb
- Proust review fails after some early promise
- What would we have done if Iranian hostages were ours?
- Fixing recruiting and retention means fixing veteran care
- Irony Corner: Rejected Proust recommendations

More old lessons relearnt ... again

But these are not the only old lessons being relearnt the hard way in actual battle in Afghanistan. The Canadians have also been most impressed by the mobile artillery support provided by their Dutch allies' new 55-tonne self-propelled PzH2000NL howitzers (also directly supporting the Australian troops collocated and operating with the Dutch in Oruzgan Province). Other valuable lessons have been drawn from the deployment of LAV-3 armoured vehicles and their improved performance over the older LAV-2 variants, and of the need for transport aircraft capable of deploying tanks by air in emergencies or where geopolitical realities prevent strategic sealift or overland transport.

The informative background brief on the new tank procurement published on 12 April 2007 by the Canadian Department of National Defence (www.mdn.ca) makes many of the same points emphasised in recent DSTO and ADF studies of tank requirements and capabilities in Australia. The first and second paragraphs begin with commonsense (and familiar) observations: that *the heavily protected direct-fire capability of a main battle tank is an invaluable tool in the arsenal of any military*, and that *simply put, tanks save lives, providing soldiers with a high level of protection*. The paper's discussion of why Canada needs 100 tanks to sustain the deployment of one squadron of around 20, strikingly mirrors similar force-structuring and sustainment deductions and decisions made in Australia.

That the Canadian analysis makes no mention of such tanks being bought to participate in supposed American armoured thrusts towards Pyongyang, Teheran or Damascus may shock some armchair commentators in Australia. It will not surprise anyone who actually knows anything about modern warfare. They recognise that if Australia has to deploy its light infantry forces on the scale Canada has had to do, we too would need to protect and enhance such forces with our new main battle tanks.

Aficionados of strategic and operational debate in Australia about the utility of main battle tanks in modern battle are now watching the anti-tank bunker entrenched in the Coombs Building at ANU with considerable curiosity. Just how will Professors Ball, Dibb and White try to ignore or explain away these latest highly germane battlefield experiences and other empirical research by our Canadian brethren? ●

Lessons from lost LAVs

The recent roadside bomb attack in southern Iraq that crippled an Australian LAV-2 armoured vehicle and *wounded* (not *injured*) the three diggers on board highlighted some important lessons. It seems clear that the (external) bar armour and (internal) spall liners fitted to the vehicle just before it was deployed overseas greatly contributed to the crew being only wounded rather than killed.

The broader fundamental lesson involved has unfortunately been overlooked by many commentators. When the LAV-2 fleet was first procured in 1995-96 (following trials with some ex-USMC vehicles in 1990-91) the procurement fell victim to the *fitted for but not with* force-structuring mentality that so limited ADF readiness and capability during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The LAVs subsequently deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years have required significant upgrading in order to be capable of modern battle and offer sufficient protection to their

crews and embarked troops. It is also worth noting that our ageing M-113 Armoured Personnel Carriers could not be safely deployed at all, and our mechanised infantry forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have been forced instead to use LAV-2s borrowed from the cavalry.

Similar lessons about the subsequent fitting of adequate self-protection systems, sensors and offensive weaponry have been learnt from our experiences of deploying ships and aircraft to the Middle East Area of Operations in recent years. In each case it has been a scramble to procure and fit the additional items needed to complete the relevant capability.

Never again must the ADF be inflicted with platforms, weapons and equipment procured on the naïve basis that *fitted for but not with* is an adequate substitute for the real thing in the first place. Never again must the ADF be a victim of siren songs claiming that the dollars supposedly saved by this policy in the short-term (but not in the long) are somehow worth more than the lives eventually risked by such parsimony. ●

Proust review juts at familiar windmill

The report of the Proust Review was published at 4PM on the Thursday before the Easter Holiday break. The accompanying Government response ably matched the timing of the release and the resulting public commentary. The review was effectively nobbled by its narrow terms of reference and various political considerations. The resultant report simply continued the long tradition of its dozen or so predecessors since Tange's imperious seven-year ban on reviewing his overly-centralised structure ran out in 1981. All have promised the final attainment of bureaucratic nirvana in the Department of Defence but essentially avoided answering the fundamental question of just why such reviews are continually necessary at 2-3 year intervals.

As the slogan from the 1997 Defence Efficiency Review, *organised for war, adapted for peace*, fades further into arcane corporate folklore, the contrast between the operational performance of the ADF and the complex rigidity of the department grows ever starker. Only a real first-principles review of the structure and processes of the Department of Defence will cut through more than three decades of bureaucratic empire-building, corporate tribalism and incestuous hierarchical relationships. The department is clearly incapable of reforming itself or even recognising the need for urgent and far-reaching change.

In the United States, by 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols *Department of Defense Reorganization Act* had become the only way of forcing reform on the rigid Pentagon bureaucracy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. An Antipodean version needs to be drafted forthwith by a cross-party group of patriotic backbenchers.

Meanwhile, back at Russell Offices, plans are well afoot to effectively double the number of deputy-secretary level positions in the department and the DMO from six to eleven. This would be a joke if it was not so serious a public administration scandal. ●

Iranian gambit declined

Iran's illegal and provocative seizure of a group of 15 British sailors and marines patrolling inside Iraqi territorial waters under a UN mandate seems to have been deliberately targeted against the UK rather than against the allied naval task group generally. But such an incident could have involved Australian personnel and an RAN frigate. Hopefully this episode will finally shatter the complacency of Ministers and commanders who wrongly think that ignoring the need for realistic conduct-after-capture training for ADF personnel somehow means the real risk of having them captured unprepared just goes away. ●

Veteran cure for recruiting and retention

On the day we first deployed forces to Iraq in 2003 some veterans of previous wars were demonstrating outside Parliament House about their treatment. The continued grievances held by veterans of previous wars now risk exacerbating and perpetuating the current recruiting and retention problems facing the defence force. Adequate care of veterans is a national strategic issue as well as a moral one and it must be fixed and fixed comprehensively.

Recent claims of 4-5 suicides by personnel who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last few years highlight the issue again, despite much of the Press coverage being inaccurate, sensationalist or lacking in context. The suicides and the treatment of psychiatric casualties generally were raised by the Medical Association for the Prevention of War (a left-wing pacifist group opposed to Australia's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). That it did so as a stalking horse for its own agenda does not detract from the importance of the underlying issues.

In general, the post-operation debriefing and aftercare provided by the defence force is now very good (although not perfect). Cultural inhibitions in individuals about seeking psychological or psychiatric help remain a problem as they do in wider society. The suicide rate of ADF personnel, both generally and after operational service, is well below wider community rates.

The main problem remains the continuing care provided after discharge from the ADF by agencies such as Comcare or the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). For bureaucratic and historical reasons the legislation governing this support is contained in separate Acts, depending in part on the nature and classification of the defence force service giving rise to the need for care or compensation. This results in the transition from military to civilian life not being a seamless and integrated system that minimises the risk of individuals dropping through the cracks. This situation also causes bureaucratic and legal pitfalls because different legislation, policies and procedures can cover different disabilities or illnesses in the one individual.

There also continues to be problems with individuals who do not seek help (either in the ADF or afterwards) or who seek it too late in the onset of their disability or illness. Moreover, the general complexity, bureaucratic hurdles and legal proofs involved with Comcare and DVA can pose a difficult challenge for individuals seeking help or compensation, especially for those suffering psychiatric conditions.

One all-encompassing piece of legislation (with perhaps some stepped qualifying conditions for peacetime, war or peacekeeping service) is needed to replace the *Veterans Entitlements Act 1986*, the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988*, the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*, and the relevant parts of the *Defence Act 1903*. This must not, of course, prejudice any existing entitlements. Such new legislation must clearly provide one simplified, integrated, system of compensation and medical care which covers all ADF members when they leave the defence force, no matter whether they served during peacetime, wartime, somewhere in between or a combination. ●

Irony corner

The Proust Review made 53 recommendations. The three most pertinent ones, on better defining and delineating the shared and individual diarchical responsibilities of the Secretary and CDF, were the only three rejected by the Government. ●

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