



# Army

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## WHICH DIVISION?

*Risk management and the Australian Army's force structure after the Vietnam War*



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## **WHICH DIVISION?**

*Risk management and the  
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after the Vietnam War*

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Australian Army History Unit  
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# RHYMING TIMES

It is worth observing — without drawing too strict a parallel — that the decision environment for today's leaders of the Australian Army is somewhat similar to that of the 1970s. The key feature of both periods was the end of a 'long war', in Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq respectively, which had dominated Army's actions for over a decade on each occasion. Other similarities are apparent in the budget situations of both periods, in which the resources allocated to defence were falling in real terms, and in the absence of an explicitly recognised adversary to guide military capability decisions. The broader social climate was also changing, and the national and global economic situation was volatile, trending towards the bleak side. It is easy to see some 'rhyme' in the decision environment facing both sets of leaders over 30 years apart.

Despite these similarities, Army's leaders then and now responded to their decision environments in different ways. During the last two years, through Plan Beersheba, the Australian Army's contemporary leadership has embarked on the most wide-ranging change to its combat force structure since the very late 1970s. This plan has as its central features three similarly structured multi-role manoeuvre brigades and the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (1st Division) as a joint formation.<sup>1</sup> This structure is designed to enable the Army to 'conduct a range of tasks concurrently and to a consistently high standard for prolonged operations.'<sup>2</sup> Yet their predecessors responded to their situation by forming three specialised brigades — one on higher readiness than the others — within an entirely Army-focused divisional structure. This force structure setting, which also included two reserve divisions, was designed with a focus on expansion and mobilisation. They also responded by creating a doctrinal divisional structure that was both different to the structure of the 'Army in reality', and sub-optimal for the key policy task of the time — defending continental Australia. These differing responses invite two interesting questions concerning the way Army leaders respond to risk and competing challenges in their force structure choices.

The first of these questions asks why the Australian Army was unable to align the 'division in reality', which was represented by Army's existing units, with the doctrinal divisional organisation. This is interesting because it shows how Army's chosen priority of mobilisation for major war did not align with the evolving government priority for forces capable of defending Australia against imagined low-level threats. The second question asks why Army's leaders chose

<sup>1</sup> Plan Beersheba is described in Chief of Army Directive 29/11, 'Change to Army's Force Structure under Plan Beersheba', 31 December 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, '2013 Defence White Paper: 'Plan BEERSHEBA' – Restructuring the Australian Army', 3 May 2013, available <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/>, accessed 10 December 2013.

to adopt specialised brigades in the period around 1980. This is important because it provides an insight into risk management during a time of resource constraint. Of course, the answers to both questions are related and also concern conceptual frameworks, the confidence gap between policy and expectations, and consequent views of risk.

Having outlined the broad features of the Australian Army's decision environment of the 1970s, this study will examine the three primary stages of development in shaping the 1st Division — the bedrock of Army's force structure — between 1972 and 1980.<sup>3</sup> The study will illustrate how the 1st Division's structure evolved as it moved from the 'Tropical Warfare' Division of the 1960s to the three specialised regular Army brigades of the early 1980s. It will also show that Army's leaders developed a very different division as the basis for their doctrine.<sup>4</sup> This doctrinal division was essentially a tool for mobilisation planning and training, but it was structurally out of kilter with the emerging priority for forces capable of dispersed operations against low-level incursions in the north of Australia. The study concludes with observations on how the Australian Army's leaders of the post-Vietnam period responded to risk through force structure, and some insights into the enduring challenges of force structure decision-making.

## THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY'S DECISION ENVIRONMENT OF THE 1970s

An organisation's 'decision environment' is the sum of the physical and social factors that directly influence the decision-making behaviour of individuals within that organisation.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Australian Army, the decision environment can be conceptualised in terms of international strategic factors including competition and cooperation among other states and some non-state actors; national policy settings which respond to these strategic factors and the preferences of political leaders; technological change and opinion on the future of warfare; change within Australian society; and the legacy of prior decisions

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<sup>3</sup> In military terms, a 'division' is a combat formation of between 10,000 and 20,000 people. It is usually commanded by a two-star officer (major general). A division contains sufficient combat, logistic and command support for independent operations. Divisions can have specialised functions such as armoured, mechanised, amphibious, mountain or standard infantry, based on the type of equipment and training it possesses. A brigade is a subordinate formation of the division. It contains between 3000 and 5000 people. It is commanded by a one-star officer (brigadier — or colonel in the United States) and can perform independent operations of limited scale and duration.

<sup>4</sup> In military organisations, doctrine explains how an army intends to apply its power — in a conceptual and practical sense — to achieve the military objectives of national strategy. Doctrine is agreed at the highest levels, and communicated through writing and training.

<sup>5</sup> This concept is borrowed from psychology, business and computer science. See Robert Harris, 'Introduction to Decision Making: Part 1', 2012, available at: <http://www.virtualsalt.com/>, accessed 10 December 2013; FYahyanejad et.al., 'Gene Selection using Tabu Search in Prostate Cancer Microarray Data' in The Third International Conference on Contemporary Issues in Computer and Information Science, 2012, p. 577.

and organisational preferences (for example, basing and equipment decisions, and ‘articles of faith’ derived from professional judgement and ingrained through education). This definition excludes the personalities of different leaders as an analytical factor, justified by the lack of available tools to conduct such analysis, and the possibility that such a focus would lead to caricatures of those individuals or ‘great man’ explanations for decisions.<sup>6</sup>

Bounding this decision environment is important for analysis because it influences the way Army responds in terms of land warfare concepts and doctrine, internal budget priorities, organisational structure and change, land capability development choices, Army personnel policies, Army logistics and reserves. While this range of implications makes the decision environment a very rich area for analysis, this study will focus only on one reaction to the environment of the 1970s: the reshaping of Army’s major combat formation, the 1st Division, although it would be just as interesting to examine the response to reserves, human resource challenges, logistics concepts and arrangements, and major capability acquisitions.<sup>7</sup> However the way Army organised its combat force illustrates most clearly the result of its interpretation of contemporary strategic tasks and land warfare concepts, and influenced decisions on equipment acquisitions. In other words, the way Army organised itself to fight can provide the most direct insight into how its leaders viewed their situation and the consequent risks.

### *Social, economic and political forces shaped Army’s decision environment*

Australia in the 1970s was a different place to the present day and it is difficult now to capture a feeling for the times. Given the range of academic and popular histories available, only the broad outlines will be provided where these are important to an understanding of the Australian Army of the time.

Even in outline form it is possible to perceive the depth of change that Australia had begun to experience from the late 1960s. In social terms, the Australian people were coming to grips with gender equality, which had been promoted by wider access to education, new contraceptive methods and an increasing acceptance of women in the workforce. All around the world, student and worker movements

<sup>6</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Palgrave MacMillan, Houndsmills, UK, 2001, pp. 47–49.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent study of the impact of this period on reserves is Dayton McCarthy’s *The Once and Future Army*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2003. Other important works that describe the Army in this period provide valuable sources for this work and include: David Horner, *Duty First: The Royal Australian Regiment in War and Peace*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990; Albert Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001; Michael Evans, *Forward from the Past The Development of Army Doctrine 1972-Present*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Study Paper 301, Department of Defence, Canberra, 1999; Bob Breen, *Struggling for Self Reliance: Four case studies of Australian Regional Force Projection in the late 1980s and the 1990s*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre/ANU e-Press, Canberra, 2008; John Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2013. Stephan Fruehling’s collection of the strategic basis papers of this period is also a good reference. See S. Fruehling (ed), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy since 1945*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2009.

were defying authority and seeking social change. Older attitudes, such as those to relating to indigenous people, the environment, drugs, marriage and immigration, were also changing.<sup>8</sup> However, despite this apparent state of flux, there was much that remained the same. Importantly, Australia still regarded itself as part of a ‘Western community’ that was opposed to communist domination.<sup>9</sup> This led, as Australian author George Megalogenis put it recently, to a ‘belated embrace of the 1960s’ by Australian society, albeit in an enthusiastic way.<sup>10</sup>

Australia’s exposure to the international economy was another source of change and influence. At the macro level, the Bretton Woods system, which had dominated the international economy since the 1940s, came to an end when the gold standard collapsed in 1971. Further shocks, including an oil embargo and rapid increase in the price of oil, followed soon after. A subsequent burst of ‘stagflation’, in which both inflation and unemployment rose dramatically and in tandem, resulted in harsh economic times with demands for wages growth and a more comprehensive welfare state.<sup>11</sup> The story of the time can be told in some key numbers: Australian inflation spiralled from 6% in 1971 to over 15% in 1975; the price of crude oil quadrupled following the 1973 oil shock; and Australian unemployment, long below 2%, reached 6% by 1978.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Australian governments of the time found it difficult to pay for the expectations they had created.

Changes were also occurring in Australia’s international relationships and strategic environment. A new ‘multipolar world’ was emerging as Japan, China and Europe recovered from war and revolution, albeit falling short of the level of military power that both superpowers could generate. Concerns mounted over both intra-state and interstate conflict across the globe, particularly in the Middle East, South-East Asia and, later in the decade, Afghanistan. A number of conflicts were still in progress; indeed, the Vietnam and Cambodian wars did not end until 1975, despite the fact that Australian and US combat support had ceased earlier. While this and other internal conflicts in Asia dominated the Australian Army’s concerns for almost two decades, major interstate war — possibly a nuclear

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<sup>8</sup> For analysis of the social, political and economic change of this period, see Stuart MacIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2009, Chapters 8 and 9; Ian W. McLean, *Why Australia Prospered: The Shifting Sources of Economic Growth*, Princeton University Press, US, 2012, Chapter 9; P.G. Edwards and David Goldsworthy, *Facing North: 1970s to 2000*, Melbourne University Press/Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 2004. A short presentation on this era is Jessica Cole’s ‘Social and Cultural Features of 1970s Australia’, available at: <<http://prezi.com/hqers7n2h0tm/social-and-cultural-features-of-1970s-australia/>>, accessed 5 December 2014.

<sup>9</sup> For a strong statement of Australia’s interests as a member of the ‘Western Community’, see Department of Defence, *Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy 1973* in Freübling (ed), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy Since 1945* (cited as ‘Strategic Basis 1973’). Defence policy documents made reference to this connection until the 1990s.

<sup>10</sup> George Megalogenis, *The Great Australian Moment*, Hamish Hamilton/ Penguin, Camberwell, Vic, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> McLean, *Why Australia Prospered*, pp. 217–18; Ray Broomhill, ‘Australian Economic Booms in Historical Perspective’, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, Issue 61, 2008, pp. 21–22.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Long Term Inflation Trends’, available at: <<http://www.abs.gov.au/>>, accessed 6 December 2013; International Energy Agency, ‘Saving Oil in a Hurry’, available at: <<http://www.iea.org/publications/>>, accessed 6 December 2013, p. 36; Productivity Commission, ‘Aspects of Structural Change in Australia’, Research Report, AusInfo, Canberra, 1998, Figure 4.1.

confrontation between the US and Soviet Union or a broader conflict between China and Vietnam — was still a real possibility.

By 1970 Japan had replaced Britain as Australia's major trading partner, which made North-East Asian security and the security of its sea lines of communication important to Australian policymakers.<sup>13</sup> The United Kingdom's economic policy followed its earlier strategic policy decision to focus 'west of Suez' when it joined the European Common Market in 1973. A major shift in official attitudes to China after 1973, decolonisation in the Pacific and Papua New Guinea throughout the 1970s, different policy positions towards the threat of war in Indo-China, and an increasingly stable Indonesian foreign policy under President Suharto changed perceptions of priorities and threats for Australian leaders in a short period of time.<sup>14</sup> Attitudes towards the United States were becoming critical if not somewhat ambivalent. Despite clear statements emphasising Australia's continued support for the alliance, some sections of the Whitlam government were outwardly hostile to US influence and, following the announcement of the Nixon (or Guam) Doctrine in 1968, the perceived willingness of the US to remain involved in the region was questioned, even by its closest supporters.<sup>15</sup> This was new territory for Australian leaders.

### *Defence policy settings had important implications for Army*

These changes in the broader decision environment necessitated a rapid reappraisal of Australian defence policy. No longer was supporting regional stability through troop contributions to US or British-led interventions a viable strategy, as both powers reduced and then ended their land combat commitments in South-East Asia. The malleable notion of 'self reliance' was subsequently identified as the guiding principle for Australian military development, to be pursued within the context of defending Australia as the main priority. These changes were supported by reappraised assumptions of instability in South-East Asia, and the level to which these were actually injurious to Australian interests. There was also a period of 'detente' in superpower relations from the early to late 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Given this mixed but related change in the disposition of allies and changes in policy positions, strategic policymakers identified no major threat to

<sup>13</sup> See Department of Defence, 'The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy (March 1971)' in Freübling, *A History of Australian Strategic Policy*, paragraphs 118–128 (cited as Strategic Basis 1971); *Strategic Basis 1973*, Part 1, paragraph 4a, Part II, paragraph 41, and Part VI, paragraph 1.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence Report 1973*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1973, pp. 5–6. Hereafter, the annual reports are cited as *Defence Report* (Year).

<sup>15</sup> See the excerpts of statements by Prime Minister Whitlam in G. Barclay and J. Siracusa (eds.), *Australian-American Relations Since 1945*, Holt, Reinhardt and Winston, Sydney, 1976, pp. 110–11; Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2008, pp. 136–40; Gary Brown, 'The ANZUS Alliance; The Case Against' in D. Ball and C. Downes (eds.), *Security and Defence*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> See *Strategic Basis 1973*, Part II; The Hon. D.J. Killen, *Australian Defence* (Defence White Paper), Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976, paragraph 10 (cited as *Australian Defence 1976*).

Australia outside the unlikely event of general war.

This is not to say that analysts did not consider interstate war unlikely, or that further instability in the region was impossible. The official strategic guidance papers of the early and mid-1970s, including the first Defence white paper (1976), pointed to concerns over nuclear proliferation,<sup>17</sup> the potential for instability in Papua New Guinea and South-East Asia,<sup>18</sup> and concerns over Soviet encroachment into the near region and Indian Ocean.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the decade, there was mounting anxiety over the possibility of war. In a late 1979 critique of draft policy update documents, Army leaders argued that Defence's writing team had not paid due attention to potential flashpoints such as those in Iran, China, Vietnam and Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In general, these problems and potential challenges were described in policy terms as 'uncertainty' rather than immediate threats to Australia's interests, so the strategic environment for Australia was not considered risky in the near term.<sup>21</sup> But it was clearly implied that disorder in the global context might require Australian military responses in threatening environments at some stage.

It is also worth noting the developments in technology and land warfare of the time. The 1970s saw the rapid introduction of computing into military technology which was assisted by more precise and longer ranging weapons and better surveillance.<sup>22</sup> On the doctrinal side, conventional warfighting in a nuclear setting dominated considerations, with a nascent manoeuvre warfare school emerging in most Western armies using German and Soviet concepts.<sup>23</sup> World War II experience in conventional operations was also influential in Australia.<sup>24</sup> In combination, these factors created a clear trend that saw mechanised and armoured forces as the key fighting tools of land warfare — and heralded a significant increase in the cost of military equipment.<sup>25</sup>

Internally, Defence's structure was undergoing major change. From 1973, the 'Tange Review' of the Department of Defence heralded significant change in the way Army related to government and the central Department of Defence.<sup>26</sup> By 1975 the separate ministers for each service had gone, and a new Chief of

<sup>17</sup> *Strategic Basis 1973*, Part II, paragraphs 34–37.

<sup>18</sup> *Strategic Basis 1975*, paragraphs 126–28, 186–87.

<sup>19</sup> *Strategic Basis 1973*, Part IV, paragraphs 32–33; *Strategic Basis 1975*, paragraph 22; *Australia's Defence 1976*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>20</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1979, Vol. 2, COPS, 'Defence Publications – "The Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives" and "Defence Force Capabilities"', 9 May 1979, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see *Australia's Defence 1976*, pp. 2, 4. See also AAHU, Army Development Committee Archive Papers, Vol. 3, 1974, 'Interim Australian Army Field Force Concept of Operations 1975–1990', 26 July 1974, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> These changes were described as a 'revolution in conventional military technologies' by Ross Babbage, *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1980, Chapter 2.

<sup>23</sup> General Don A. Stary, 'Changing an Army: An American Perspective' in Michael Evans (ed), *Changing the Army: The roles of doctrine, development and training*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, 2000, Chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> GOC Training Command Directive 1975, cited in Michael Evans, 'An Engine for Change: The Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1972–1997' in Evans, *Changing the Army*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Babbage, *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>26</sup> Sir Arthur Tange, *Australian Defence: Report on the Reorganisation of the Defence Group of Departments*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974.

Defence Force Staff had become notionally a co-equal in the management of the Department of Defence with the civilian departmental secretary. Military officers were posted to Defence Central in a nascent joint staff arrangement, although not in large numbers.<sup>27</sup> New committee processes accompanied these changes, as did some centralisation in decision-making, and a greater imperative to achieve consensus among the four major organisations involved in Defence.

One of the consequences of the need for internal consensus was a significant problem with the clarity and authority of strategic guidance in the 1970s. While defending Australia became a co-equal priority in 1968 and the sole priority from 1973 onwards, Army did not take effective steps to implement this. Some of the challenges in implementation included funding and the government's unwillingness to endorse key strategic planning documents of the time, including the 1975 Strategic Basis and 1976 Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives papers (ASADPO 1976).<sup>28</sup> Where guidance was provided, it was criticised as an inadequate basis for planning because it lacked conclusions and government endorsement, and key issues were not covered or inadequately defined.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the services, Defence Central and the increasingly important Chief of the Defence Force Staff were unable to agree on force structure priorities, which led to significant problems for defence planning during this period.<sup>30</sup>

One such problem area was the tension that arose from having forces ready for immediate contingences and the need to provide an expansion base for mobilisation from within a small 'core force'. According to official statements of the time, the core force:

... should be a force able to undertake peacetime tasks, a force sufficiently versatile to deter or cope with a range of low-level contingencies which have sufficient credibility, and a force with relevant skills and equipment capable of timely expansion to deter or meet a developing situation.<sup>31</sup>

This was later accepted in policy.<sup>32</sup> However, the forces assumed to be required

<sup>27</sup> *Defence Report 1974*, p. 18; *Defence Report 1975*, pp. 34–35.

<sup>28</sup> Stephan Freühling, 'Australian Strategic Guidance Since the Second World War' in Freühling, *A History of Australian Strategic Policy*, pp. 29–31. The 1979 version of ADASPO was endorsed, but it was still criticised by Army for its lack of clear guidance on Army's responsibilities and its priorities. See AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1982, Vol. 2, COPS, 'The Army Development Guide, Volume 1 Part 2: Aspects of Army Guidance', 19 March 1982, pp. 2–7. A 'strategic basis' paper was endorsed in 1979, but this paper is not yet public. Freühling stated that it did not depart from the broad policy guidelines set in 1976 (Freühling, 'Australian Strategic Guidance', p. 32), and it is fair to assume that it did not solve the basic concerns over strategic guidance and force structure priority setting.

<sup>29</sup> See AAHU, CASAG Proceedings Vol. 2, 1979, COPS, 'Defence Publications – "The Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives" and "Defence Force Capability"', CGSAC Submission 12/1979 of 9 May 1979, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, March 1976 ('Dibb Review'), p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Strategic Basis 1975*, paragraph 255. It should be noted that this paper was not accepted by the government at the time, although the core force definition is unlikely to have been responsible for that.

<sup>32</sup> *Australia's Defence 1976*, p. 13.

to defend Australia against low-level raids were somewhat different to those required for high-end warfighting against a conventional enemy. For instance, emerging Australian strategic analyst Ross Babbage asked whether independent brigades and territorial forces might be more relevant to the task of defending Australia than the conventionally organised division.<sup>33</sup> Expansion had different needs to those of contingencies. In order to expand rapidly, a force would need a large training base and a number of long lead-time capabilities from the permanent force. In contrast, contingencies generally require broadly capable forces at high readiness and an ability to rotate these forces. The needs of the two tasks — contingencies and expansion — were therefore more difficult to reconcile than was appreciated.<sup>34</sup>

This possible contradiction could not be settled in the 1970s because strategic planners could not identify an enemy that could threaten Australia within the period of their assessments (out into the 1980s). This judgement proved sound. However, it created a fundamental problem for force structure planners, particularly in Army, because it meant that actual operational tasks were difficult to conceptualise. This problem also meant that service and civilian officers were unable to agree on a concept of operations for the defence of Australia, considered a foundation requirement for capability planning at the time.<sup>35</sup>

Not only were Army's senior officers of the time critical of this lack of guidance, the frustration felt was also effectively captured by Major G.L. Cheeseman.<sup>36</sup> In a republished paper he described the convoluted force development process and the confusing impact of unclear and 'unagreed' guidance in a competitive bureaucratic process. In Cheeseman's view:

The overall consequence of such poorly defined strategic guidance is that both the military and civilians in Defence are able to justify or refute almost any increase in defence capability they choose ...<sup>37</sup>

He also noted that Army's frustration with the limited strategic guidance had led to the production of its own development guide, which exhibited similar faults to

<sup>33</sup> Babbage, 'Australia's Strategic Re-orientation' in R. O'Neil, *The Defence of Australia – Fundamental New Aspects*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1976, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 326–27.

<sup>35</sup> This problem is cited in important Army development papers such as: AAHU, Army Development Committee Archive Papers, Vol. 3 1974, 'Interim Australian Army Field Force Concept of Operations 1975–1990' (26 July 1974), p. 3; AAHU, Army Development Committee Archive Papers, Vol. 1, 1974, 'Review of the Organisation of the Division', R580/R1/43, 30 November 1973, p. 1; AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings Vol. 2 1982, COPS, 'The Army Development Guide (ADG), Part 3, Section One, Concept of Operations', Submission 6/1982 (which concerned only 'Army' aspects of operations and had no departmental or ministerial endorsement).

<sup>36</sup> References to the dissatisfaction with strategic guidance by senior Army officers of the time can be found in Sir Mervyn Brogan, 'Men, Money and material in defence of Mainland Australia', *Pacific Defence Reporter*, August 1974, p. 6 (pp. 6–9); comments attributed to Lieutenant General Hassett in Michael Evans, 'Forward from the Past', pp. 67–68; Robert Lowry, *The Last Knight: A biography of General Sir Philip Bennett AC, KBE, DSO*, Big Sky Publishing, Sydney, 2011, Chapter 8. The opposite view is expressed by Rear Admiral Sir Anthony Synott, 'The Changing Challenge for our Defence Force' in John Birnam (ed), *Australia's Defence*, University of Western Australia, Perth, 1976, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Major G.L. Cheeseman, 'Army Force Development', *Defence Force Journal*, No. 16, May/June 1979, p. 18.

the strategic basis papers — with the additional problem of not being endorsed by Defence Central. He commented that, at the time of writing in 1978, no Army Staff Objectives, which were foundation research documents concerning future capability needs and commissioned within Army, had been published.<sup>38</sup>

Further condemnation of the inadequacies of strategic guidance in the 1970s came from ministerial consultant Paul Dibb. In his seminal 1986 review of defence force capability, Dr Dibb commented that ‘these papers only contained general guidance without clear priorities, were not necessarily endorsed by government and included highly qualified judgements.’ Like Cheeseman, he also dismissed this as an insufficient basis for decision-making.<sup>39</sup> However, decisions continued to be made at the time and some of these decisions — which pertain to the division and its structure — will be examined later in this paper.

### *Decisions have effects*

The effect of the government’s defence policy decisions on Army is graphically illustrated in two charts. The first chart plots changes to Army’s budget over the period 1970–80. During this decade, which reached its nadir in 1973, government spending on defence fell by 7% in real terms. This resulted from a combination of deliberate spending reductions and the cumulative impacts of high inflation and wage increases. Total defence spending began to rise under Prime Minister Fraser, who promised a 7% real-term increase from 1980.<sup>40</sup> However, whenever actual funding failed to meet guidance, as occurred in 1978–79, funding tended to be drawn from capability development initiatives.<sup>41</sup> Importantly for Army, its share of that budget continued to fall over the decade, from 43% of the appropriation to the uniformed services in 1970–71, to 34% of a smaller appropriation by 1979–80 (see Chart 1).

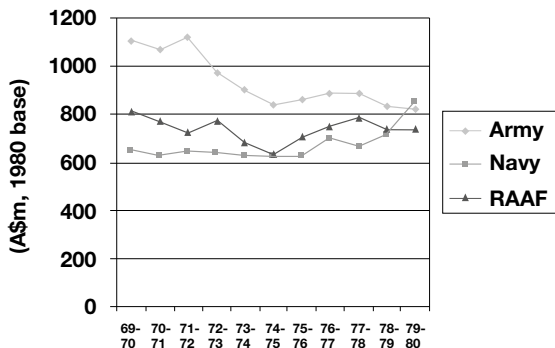
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<sup>38</sup> Major G.L. Cheeseman, ‘Army Force Development’, p. 18. This paper was republished in D. Ball and J.O. Langtry, *Problems of Mobilisation in Defence of Australia*, Phoenix Defence Publications, Manuka, ACT, 1980, Chapter 2.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Dibb Review’, pp. 26–27. Later analysis by Bob Breen questioned the impact of ambiguous guidance compared with ‘100 years of conditioning and inter-Service rivalry.’ (Breen, *Struggling for Self Reliance: Four case studies of Australian Regional Force Projection in the late 1980s and the 1990s*, ANU e-Press, Canberra, 2008, pp. 158–9.

<sup>40</sup> *Defence Report 1980*, p. 2.

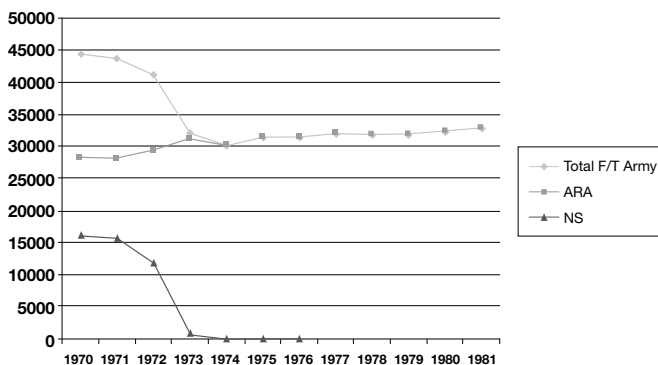
<sup>41</sup> The forward plan for equipment purchases was reduced by 40% in 1978 due to an overall reduction in the Defence allocation. See AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1978, Vol. 3, Six Year Capital Equipment Plan 1978/79–1983/84, 6 July 1978, pp. 1–3.



**Chart 1: Expenditure on Defence Function 1969-70 to 1979-80 (A\$m, 1980 base)**

Sources: Defence Reports 1970 to 1981; RBA Inflation Calculator  
Compiled by author

A similar picture of decline is apparent in an illustration of Army's manpower. While Army's overall strength in 1973 was larger than its pre-Vietnam war strength,<sup>42</sup> its full-time strength never reached the intermediate post-Vietnam War planning figure of 34,000 in the period under consideration, much less the contingent planning strength of 36,000 by mid-1978.<sup>43</sup>



**Chart 2: Army Staffing 1970 - 1981**

Sources: Defence Report (from 1971 to 1981)  
Compiled by author

<sup>42</sup> Army's average full-time strength pre-1965 was around 20,000. In 1973 it dropped precipitously from a high of 44,051 in June 1970 to 30,235 in June 1974. See *Defence Report 1974*, p. 50, Table 10.

<sup>43</sup> In 1973, Minister Barnard announced that the planning size of Army would be 34,000 by 1976, which could grow to 36,000 by 1978 if recommended by a review planned in 1976. See NAA A7123/2 Part 1, Higher Defence Policy/Australia, 'Barnard Statement 30 May 1973', pp. 7-8; NAA A6835-4, CGS Minutes 1973, 'Letter Lieutenant General Hassett letter to Minister Barnard', 27 December 1973; NAA 5915, 349: Cabinet Minute, Decision No 713, 'Australian Army, Immediate Future Shape and Size', 29 May 1973.

It is difficult to characterise such a diverse and volatile situation. However, it is clear that the decision environment faced by Army's leaders in the 1970s was one of considerable uncertainty and unattained resource assumptions. First among the causes of this uncertainty was the reduced surety of its allies' commitment to support Australia in time of need, particularly in the early 1970s. At the same time, Army's leaders saw a hostile strategic environment in which it was possible for Army to be deployed offshore, making mobilisation for conventional war settings a key factor in their thinking. Yet Australian policy settings were primarily geared towards the defence of continental Australia against an indeterminable threat. At the same time, a rapidly deteriorating national budget situation and a prioritisation of 'butter over guns' by the Whitlam government, saw the resources allocated to defence fall year after year. This came at a time when large equipment fleets from the 1950s and 1960s were wearing out and new technology was evolving rapidly. This combination of factors probably made the most significant contribution to the strategic uncertainty faced by Army's leaders in that period.

The two main implications of this decision environment for Army's leaders across the decade were clear. First, Army did not achieve the size promised by political leaders during the decade, which created personnel and equipment shortages ('hollowness') with the force structure. Indeed, the entire resourcing situation became most unfavourable for Army's plans as investment was increased in maritime (air and naval) forces. Second, the lack of clear strategic guidance allowed Army to retain some flexibility in organisation within the broad boundaries set by policy. As the next section will show, this ambiguity allowed Army leaders to focus on what they saw as the most dangerous situation involving fighting offshore against a conventional enemy while they adopted the rhetoric of the 'defence of Australia'.

# THE ARMY'S RESPONSE: THE DIVISION IN REALITY AND DOCTRINE IN THE 1970s

This section examines the Army's response to its decision environment in the 1970s through a single lens: that of the changes to the division. As previously mentioned, this lens has been chosen because it provides a clear view of the way Army interpreted its roles and future fighting environment and because the choice of divisional structure influences other major activities such as capability development.

In this period, Army fought hard to maintain the 1st Division, its primary regular army formation, as its central capability. It did this for strategic, training, tactical and contingency reasons, and it argued its case in every necessary forum, including to new ministers, parliamentary inquiries and in public. But there was no single 'division' during this period, as both the Army's organisation and the doctrinal structure of the division changed in the period 1972–80 to meet resource and practical needs. These changes were also influenced by legacy factors such as basing and a desire to maintain some continuity in the identity of combat units. The changes to the 1st Division and the division in doctrine occurred in three distinct but linked phases, until Army leaders ultimately adopted a risk management approach to force structure in the late 1970s.

## *The decision environment is shaped by legacies of earlier times*

Decision-makers rarely start with a clean slate. Their decision environment is shaped by decisions made previously, and often contains sunk costs in terms of basing, equipment and infrastructure. The decision environment may also be influenced by old decisions that need to be honoured in order to maintain face, tradition or consistency. It is important to describe this legacy because it explains some of the assumptions held by Army's leaders in the 1970s. These assumptions were based on the experience of the previous two decades and included a number of experiments to find the optimal form of organisation for the new 'regular' Army. This move towards a full-time Army during the 1950s and 1960s was important because it represented a change in priority away from the part-time militia force which had been the mainstay of the Australian Army before and after the First World War, towards a regular force that would meet the nation's increasingly offshore defence commitments.

The new regular force was formed in 1948, when three post-Second World War battalions were retained and renamed as permanent force battalions of the Royal

Australian Regiment. These battalions were grouped as part of a brigade force, which was the main field component of the 19,000-strong permanent force.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, the first brigade exercise by that force occurred only in 1956, after operational commitments to the Korean War had ended. The same year, a major strategic review focused Australian attention on the number of concurrent security challenges that existed in South-East Asia. It also identified the need to hold some forces at high readiness for deployment, while retaining some capacity for expansion in both force structure and training. The response to this situation — and again, to fiscal imperatives — unfolded in two stages.<sup>45</sup> The first, beginning in 1957, involved the creation of a strengthened mobile brigade group and a separate infantry battalion (then for service in Malaya).<sup>46</sup> Closely following was a new force structure design called the ‘pentropic division’, which was modelled on changes then being implemented in the US Army. This structure created larger battalions that could serve overseas as substantial contributions to allied armies, preferably as a single division.<sup>47</sup> However, the pentropic division was created without any real experimentation or detailed study into whether the proposed organisation would deliver the perceived strategic or tactical advantages.<sup>48</sup> It was unable to provide the necessary options when the Army faced its next major challenges in Borneo and Vietnam.

The third major reorganisation of the Army’s field force in less than eight years saw the tropical warfare division (TW division) raised as the standard formation structure in 1965. This division, which remained the standard until the mid-1970s, created an eight (later nine) infantry battalion division that contained its essential supporting arms and services.<sup>49</sup> The battalions were commanded by task force headquarters, a nomenclature retained from the pentropic days to avoid embarrassment over returning to the more standard term ‘brigade’. Each task force was organised in a similar way, and all maintained a focus on preparation for counter-revolutionary warfare in jungle environments.<sup>50</sup> Other important combat arms — including armoured units, medium and air defence artillery and construction engineers — remained outside the TW division but on Army’s order of battle. In peacetime, these corps troops units and regular army task forces were often commanded and administered by non-deployable ‘military districts’ or

<sup>44</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 206–08.

<sup>45</sup> The Defence budget was cut by about £3.5m to £370m in 1956–7. See Rascal Khosa (ed), *Australian Defence Almanac 2010–11*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, 2010, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> Blandland, ‘Consolidation and Reorganisation’ in Horner, *Duty First*, pp. 130–32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134–42; M.J.C. Welburn, ‘The Development of Australian Army Doctrine 1945–1964’, *Canberra papers on Strategy and Defence* No. 108, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 1994, pp. 50–52; Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 251–54; Horner, ‘From Korea to Pentropic’ in P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds.), *The Second Fifty Years: The Australian Army 1947–1997*, University of New South Wales, Canberra, 1997, pp. 66–67.

<sup>48</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 255–56, 266–69. The pentropic structure also created some internal inconsistency as the battalion deployed to Malaya had to be restructured to conform to the British model.

<sup>49</sup> The doctrinal establishment contained ten battalions. See Horner, ‘From Korea to Pentropic’, p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Welburn, ‘The Development of Australian Army Doctrine’, pp. 64–67.

‘area headquarters’ until functional commands were instituted in 1973.<sup>51</sup> The TW division, despite some acknowledged deficiencies, remained the preferred fighting organisation for the Australian Army following the Vietnam War.

What was important, for the purposes of this paper, was the move during this time from a focus on the large Citizen Military Forces (CMF) divisional organisations in geographic command structures and the nascent regular Army brigade, to a regular Army divisional structure within a functional command system. There was also a significant focus on concurrent operations, which included commitments to operations, strategic reserves and the defence of Australia’s New Guinea territory. The number of these commitments, which had included combat in Korea, Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam during the preceding two decades, undoubtedly created an impression that the Australian Army would need to be prepared for operations overseas.<sup>52</sup>

### *Army tried to save the silverware immediately after Vietnam*

Changes to government policy were to alter both the outlook for Army and the resources available in late 1972 and early 1973. The rapid reduction of Army from 45,000 troops to around 31,000, a result of the effective termination of the National Service scheme by the incoming Whitlam government in December 1972, left the Australian Regular Army (ARA), particularly its infantry battalions, very hollow. It also had a dramatic impact on the already dwindling CMF, as a large number of men who had chosen this option for National Service then elected to discharge.<sup>53</sup>

The fate of the CMF was not, however, the major concern for Army’s leaders at the time. With the drawdown of Australia’s major overseas commitments, a new government policy focused on defending Australia, and warnings of significant budget cuts, Army’s leaders faced considerable uncertainty over the role and shape of its regular component. Their first chosen response was to maintain the TW division structure, with the existing nine ARA battalions, by altering the resource allocations to each. Under this plan, three battalions would remain at around 600 strong (which was a small reduction in the TW division establishment), two more would have around 50–65% of establishment, while

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<sup>51</sup> The three functional commands — Field Force, Training and Logistics — assumed many of the operational, command and support functions previously performed by the geographically based Military Districts. See Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 287–91. Corps troops units were particularly high value units that could be used by a corps-level commander to influence the battle at a specific time and place. Normally, these units were allocated to the divisional commander on a temporary basis unless they were large enough to have their own headquarters or were performing a geographically separated task.

<sup>52</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 256–57; Welburn, ‘The Development of Australian Army Doctrine’, pp. 55–59; Blaxland, ‘Consolidation and Reorganisation’, pp. 142–47.

<sup>53</sup> The CMF strength fell from around 28,000 in June 1972 to 23,119 within 12 months. See McCarthy, *The Once and Future Army*, pp. 163–64, 169.

four battalions would be training units around 200 strong.<sup>54</sup> There was also a large support element to maintain which, in 1973, was slightly over two-thirds of the total ARA establishment.

The Chief of the General Staff (CGS) of the time, Lieutenant General Sir Mervyn Brogan, later explained his reasoning for this recommendation:

The aim was to preserve ... the potency of the combat element ... [so] sub-units essential to the combat effectiveness of fighting formations were left skeleton-manned or in suspended animation.<sup>55</sup>

Other arguments were also advanced, which included maintaining a credible all-volunteer army and retaining the ARA battalions as an 'expansion' base — as a training organisation in the event of a general mobilisation or as a means to rapidly expand for contingencies.<sup>56</sup>

These arguments ultimately fell flat. In a submission to the Defence Force Development Committee (DFDC) in December 1972, the Department of Defence countered Army's preferred option by arguing:

The strategic guidance would not appear to suggest such large initial capability as the deployment of a three-battalion task force within six months, at least in the 1970s.<sup>57</sup>

The authors also argued that Army's reason for retaining the nine-battalion structure was based on scenarios which 'differ from those endorsed by DFDC'. They questioned whether 'unit rotation' was essential and noted that retaining nine battalions would require a force of around 36,000.<sup>58</sup> This latter figure was well in excess of the force of around 30,000 which Army had been told to use as the basis for planning, even though the nine-battalion structure was 'not inconsistent' with strategic guidance.<sup>59</sup> Despite this small accommodation, it could be argued that Army simply did not respond to the policy change that had occurred with the new government and had attempted to retain the 'silverware' — its infantry battalions — within the divisional structure.

<sup>54</sup> NAA A3688/24, item 584/R1/4, 'Future Shape of the ARA', 7 December 1972. See also Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 284–86.

<sup>55</sup> Brogan, 'Men, Money and Materiel in Defence of Mainland Australia', p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> NAA 7123/2, 581/R1/57 – Letter from White (Secretary, Department of Army) to Tange (Secretary, Department of Defence), 'Future Shape of the ARA', 7 December 1972, p. 1. For criticism of this position, see Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, p. 285, in which he notes that the rationale for the CMF/Army Reserve was to provide the expansion base.

<sup>57</sup> NAA A7123/2, File 240/181, Defence Force Development Committee, 'Agenda Item No 107/1972: FYRP – Army Manpower Levels – Interim and Long-Term', 15 December 1972, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> DFDC 'FYRP – Army Manpower Levels', pp. 7–12. Army would later argue that it required a force of 40,000. See NAA 7123/2, Part 1: Higher Defence Policy/Australia – Statement by Defence Minister Barnard, 30 May 1973.

<sup>59</sup> NAA A7123/2, File 240/181 – Letter Chairman of COSC (Admiral Smith) to Secretary (Tange), 'Future Shape of the ARA, 4 December 1972; DFDC, Minute 144/1972, Agenda 107/1972, 'Army Manpower Levels – Interim and Long Term', 18 December 1972.

In May 1973, Minister Barnard announced that Army would be reduced to six ARA battalions, with a number of the battalions linked to become new units. All battalions would be based on a similar establishment and adopt a standard light infantry role. The government's intention was to grow the ARA by 1000 people per year to a new establishment of 34,000 by 1976, which would include a support area establishment of 21,500.<sup>60</sup> Further growth, to 36,000, might be approved if the strategic circumstances warranted. Within the context of its primary role of the defence of Australia, Minister Barnard also announced that the divisional structure would be retained.<sup>61</sup>

Army must have regarded this last point as critical. Indeed, Army frequently argued its case to retain the division as the basis of its force structure and continued to do so.<sup>62</sup> In his initial letter to the Minister on his appointment as CGS, Lieutenant General Sir Frank Hassett argued that the division was essential to Army because it provided the basis for command skills, including at the higher levels of war; because it was the smallest formation that included all the arms and services; that it was a credible deterrent; and that it was the basis for doctrine development.<sup>63</sup> One senses also that the division was an important part of the ARA's self-image as a credible military force.

### *TIB 28 was a sub-optimal response to a new role*

Those assumptions on the centrality of a division to an army were also critical in the Australian Army's first post-Vietnam War attempt to prepare for its new task of defending Australia. But what Army created — the 'TIB 28 Division (Provisional)' or the 'Standard Infantry Division' — provided a less than optimal solution to perform its principal task while also leaving Army short in a number of potential mobilisation situations and possible contingency tasks.<sup>64</sup>

By 1973 change to the divisional structure was considered urgent. A number of problems with the TW division had been identified in Vietnam, including the inability to sustain artillery support in high-tempo actions, the lack of organic close support from tanks, the limits of the brigade headquarters in protracted operations, and the heavy reliance on US logistic support. In addition, the TW division was criticised for its lack of firepower for the defence of Australia

<sup>60</sup> This figure was of concern for CGS Brogan who explained Army's desire to put as much of its resources into the field force as possible. See NAA, A6835-4, CGS Minute No 297/1973 – Brogan to Smith, 'The Divisional Structure', 17 September 1973.

<sup>61</sup> Defence Minister Barnard also noted that Army's establishment had been 22,000 in 1964 at a time when the strategic environment was far more uncertain. See NAA 7123/2, Part 1: Higher Defence Policy/Australia – Statement by Defence Minister Barnard, 30 May 1973.

<sup>62</sup> For example, see NAA, A6835-4, CGS Minute No 297/1973, Brogan to Smith, 'The Divisional Structure', 17 September 1973.

<sup>63</sup> NAA, A6835-4, CGS 382/1973, Minute Hassett to Barnard, dated 27 December 1973, pp. 3-4.

<sup>64</sup> Australian Army, *Training Information Bulletin 28 – The Division (Provisional)*, 1975.

mission, as well as significant limitations in surveillance and aerial resupply and transport. Interestingly, the civil affairs capability that was so important in Vietnam was considered unnecessary for operations inside Australia, which misinterpreted the role of this capability in low-level or security operations.<sup>65</sup>

While the concept for a new divisional structure was developed ‘without insight into strategic guidance on the defence of Australia’, Army was able to draw on its own concept paper describing the future warfighting environment.<sup>66</sup> This paper, which was completed in mid-1974, accurately identified a number of relevant considerations for the defence of Australia. Among these were the need for strategic mobility within Australia, the need for battalions to operate separately and be deployed over wide areas, the increased need to rely on civil infrastructure, and the (low) likelihood of a threat.<sup>67</sup> Other parts of the paper were not so prescient however. It assumed that the Army needed to be structured for expansion, even though the likelihood of a major assault was considered ‘very remote’ and the ‘least unlikely’ threat came from harassing-style raids.<sup>68</sup> Other curious deductions included that the enemy would have ‘rear’ areas, that there would be a need to operate against air and armoured forces, and that Army would need to conduct mobile delaying defensive operations. On balance however, the insights provided in this concept paper were not overly influential because Army did not incorporate many of its implications into its new divisional structure.

The TIB 28 divisional structure was considerably larger than the TW division in terms of personnel (an increase of around 25%), had significantly more light general service vehicles, and its own tanks, medium artillery, air defence and aviation. These changes addressed a number of the key limitations of the TW division for conventional warfare. However, TIB 28 was sub-optimal because it was conceived to fight as a single division. It could detach a task force for a short period of time, but only up to 150 kilometres from the division’s main administrative area. To go any further, the Army Development Committee noted, would be ‘uneconomical’ and ‘incompatible with the general concept of employment of a division’.<sup>69</sup> Added to this were shortcomings in broad-area surveillance (beyond reconnaissance helicopters with visual observers), and severe limitations — in terms of the requirements for operations in northern Australia — in organic mobility for the infantry battalions.

<sup>65</sup> AAHU, ADC Archive Papers, Vol. 1, 1974 – Colonels Deighton and Langtry, ‘Review of the Organisation of the Division’, R580/R1/43, 30 November 1973, pp. 4–5, 19.

<sup>66</sup> AAHU, ADC Archive Papers Vol. 1, 1974 – ADC Minute 2/1974, 21 February 1974, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> AAHU, ADC Archive Papers Vol. 3, 1974 – ‘Interim Australian Army Field Force Concept of Operations 1975–1990’, 26 July 1974, pp. 18–21, 43–44, 59–60.

<sup>68</sup> AAHU, ADC Archive Papers Vol. 3, 1974 – ‘Interim Australian Army Field Force Concept of Operations 1975–1990’, 26 July 1974, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> AAHU, ADC Archive Papers Vol. 1, 1974 – ADC Minute 2/1974, 21 February 1974, p. 1.

As a result, Army's consequent plans for acquisition and training were based on a concept and priorities that took Army even further away from the task of defending Australia. Acquisition plans of the early 1970s were dominated by heavy weaponry — tanks, air defence missiles and fire support vehicles.<sup>70</sup> Transport for infantry battalions was limited to trucks. Throughout the 1970s, training was focused on mid-intensity military operations, including the 'phases of war', that were indicative of conventional warfare.<sup>71</sup> While some exercises did focus on small-unit guerrilla forces, many were played out in scenarios more fitting of a major conventional conflict; for example, one exercise in 1974 ended in a nuclear strike against the battalion's defensive position. The battalions of the day were often training to conduct long marches in open country, and the tactics of the Second World War were re-learned as indicators of the future need.<sup>72</sup>

The attitude that gave rise to this thinking is clearly apparent in the views of senior commanders of the time. In late 1973, a meeting of senior Army commanders:

... was reminded that although the emphasis of defence policy had changed over recent months to the defence of Australia, there was always the possibility of Army being called upon to perform other tasks. In this regard, the recent offer of the Government to participate in the United Nations peace keeping mission in the Middle East was quoted as an example. Discussing the stated role of the Army, i.e. the defence of Australia, the opinion was expressed that the statement of the role of the Army as being the defence of Australia was self-evident and too broad to be related to everyday training and other activities of members of the Army; a statement of the various capabilities needed by Army to fulfil this role would be more meaningful.<sup>73</sup>

However Army's desire to ensure that it was ready for major conflicts went further than this. There was also strong support for the retention of specialised infantry skills within the force, and enhancing the readiness of the division for combat deployment. The primary skills that were to be retained or developed related to parachute, amphibious and mechanised operations, with at least a battalion assigned to nurture each skill.<sup>74</sup> These options were controversial

<sup>70</sup> During the mid-1970s, Army purchased Leopard tanks, Rapier air-defence weapons, a fire support vehicle, light observation helicopters, Nomad aircraft, medium girder bridges and light and medium general service vehicles. See *Defence Report 1977*, p. 19. New communication equipment was planned for later in the decade. See *Defence Report 1978*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>71</sup> On Army's training priorities, see AAHU, CGS Briefs and Senior Commanders Meetings Proceedings, Vol. 1, 1972–74 – Draft Army Training Directive 1973/74, dated November 1973. Pedersen described the approach to training in this period as being suited to fighting a conventional war against a powerful enemy. See also Peter Pedersen, 'The Defence of Australia', in Horner (ed), *Duty First*, p. 290. See also Breen, *Struggling for Self Reliance*, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Pederson, 'The Defence Of Australia', pp. 290–94.

<sup>73</sup> AAHU, CGS Briefings and Senior Commanders Meetings Proceedings Vol. 1, 1972–1974 – Senior Commanders Meeting: Notes on Discussion, 27 November 1973, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Remarks by General Officer Commanding Field Force in late 1973, *ibid.*, p. 8.

and would be expensive to build in a climate of constrained and diminishing resources. However, this drive was to shape the next phase of Army's response to its decision environment in the late 1970s.

Army's selection of TIB 28 as its divisional structure, in combination with its training and some (albeit few) glimpses into senior officer thinking of the early to mid-1970s, is important in understanding its response to the decision environment of the time. These factors demonstrate that Army's leaders were not focused on creating an optimal force for defending Australia against the 'least unlikely' threat of low-level raiding forces, but on maintaining a force structure that was suitable for conventional operations overseas and as a base for mobilisation for major war. While scrutiny of Army's proposals was intense and resulted in some of its recommendations being overruled, Army was still able to maintain some freedom in its decision-making by exploiting the ambiguity of extant strategic guidance and drawing on its (now reduced) institutional autonomy. However, by the mid-1970s resource pressures were becoming more intense as the impact of a one-third reduction in funding over three years bit deeply. Hollowness in the force structure, and feelings of 'drift' within a peacetime Army led the next group of Army's leaders to reappraise their situation in a most fundamental way.<sup>75</sup>

### *Army went back to first principles to identify its core force structure needs*

By the late 1970s, Army's leaders were struggling to align their budgetary and policy reality with their preferred structure and doctrine. This situation arose as some critical planning assumptions went unrealised, strategic guidance remained ambiguous, and internal criticism reduced support for the divisional structure based on TIB 28. The incoming CGS, Lieutenant General Sir Donald Dunstan, attempted to address these problems by initiating a first principles review of the Army to identify its mobilisation objective in time of major war. But despite the thoroughness of the analysis conducted for that review, Army was still unable to develop an agreed solution that reconciled its preferences with its force structure.

Perhaps the most important factor in Army's decision-making at this time was the fact that its agreed staffing level of 34,000 was never realised at any stage

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<sup>75</sup> For some insights into this sense of drift, see comments by Brigadier J. Essex Clarke (Horner, *Duty First*, p. 381) and Pedersen, 'The Defence of Australia', pp. 288–94. See also the incident involving Major General A.L. MacDonald, in which he publicly associated the disenchantment of his soldiers with changes to government policy in NAA A6835–4, CGS Minutes 1/1973–387/1973 – Letter from LTGEN Brogan to Sir Arthur Tange; 'Address by MAJGEN A.L. MacDonald CB, OBE', 5 February 1973. The increasing rate of officer resignation for reasons of 'uncertainty' in Army's future was also discussed at high levels. See AAHU, CGS Briefings and Senior Commanders Meetings Proceedings Vol. 1, 1972–1974 – Senior Commanders Meeting: Notes on Discussion, 10 December 1973, pp. 7–9.

in the decade.<sup>76</sup> This meant that Army found it increasingly difficult to meet its existing and anticipated commitments from its current force structure, which was still only planning to grow to 32,300 in 1980.<sup>77</sup> In addition, as noted earlier, its budget had fallen by around 20% over the decade, although more resources were promised as a result of the Fraser government's decision to increase defence spending in 1980.<sup>78</sup> In terms of strategic guidance, the lack of a credible threat and thus the absence of an enemy to plan against remained a major problem that persisted throughout the 1980s.<sup>79</sup>

But not all Army's problems, as viewed in 1977, were attributable to its external decision environment. The TIB 28 division, which had been agreed by the former CGS, was considered by General Dunstan to be 'too large and heavy in manpower and equipment'.<sup>80</sup> He was also concerned that the Army had become too reliant on vehicles, had lost its skills in close-country and counterinsurgency warfare, was unable to operate on 'light scales', and that it would be difficult to deploy and sustain forces on operations.<sup>81</sup> These criticisms set the path for the key initiatives that would culminate in the 'specialised brigades'.

Resource shortages also made it impossible to staff and equip the TIB 28 division, as it alone required around 18,000 soldiers from the Army's total of less than 32,000.<sup>82</sup> Equipment-wise, some critical items, such as Land Rovers with radios, were deficient in number by around 50%. Acute shortages were also experienced in the supply of other general service vehicles, and senior commanders were briefed that manpower and equipment allocations for the TIB 28 division would not be met 'for some years'.<sup>83</sup> Cultural change would also be required, as Army would have to become accustomed to shortages and the employment of practices such as equipment pooling.<sup>84</sup> In the eyes of the senior commanders, their unit commanders were having trouble accommodating this new reality.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The Farrand/Hassett Committee of 30 March 1973 (*Report of the Australian Army Organisation and Manpower Committee*) argued for the retention of the divisional structure (based on strategic needs), with a total staffing level of 38,000. This was significantly above even the provisional planning figure of 36,000 by June 1978. See AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1980, Vol. 2 – DCGS, 'The Army Manpower Review', Submission 4/80, Annex A, p. A-2; NAA A7123/2 Part 1, Higher Defence Policy/Australia – Barnard Statement 31 May 1973, pp. 7–8.

<sup>77</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1981, Vol. 2 – Army Manpower Review, CGSAC Submission 2/1981, October 1980, p. 1; AAHU, Senior Commanders Meetings Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders Meeting 24 February 1977, paragraph 32. See also *Defence Report 1980*, p. 58.

<sup>78</sup> *Defence Report 1980*, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1982, Vol. 2 – COPS, 'Army Development Guide, Vol. 1 Part 2, Army Aspects of Guidance', in CGSAC Submission 4/1982, pp. 2–8. This paper quotes ASADPO (1979), Part II, Chapter 5, p. 65, paragraph 6.

<sup>80</sup> Defence, COSC Papers 1979 – LTGEN D. Dunstan, 'Army Redevelopment – Proposed Changes in the Field Force', CGS825/1979, p. 3. Graeme Cheeseman also observed that TIB 28 was one of the largest divisional organisations in the world at the time. See 'Army Force Development' in Ball and Langtry, *Problems of Mobilisation in Defence of Australia*, p. 29.

<sup>81</sup> Horner, 'Ready Reaction and Specialisation' in *Duty First*, p. 309; Dunstan, 'Army Development', pp. 2–4; AAHU, Senior Commanders Meetings Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders meetings: Notes on Discussion Part 2, p. 8. 'Light scales' requires a force to operate with the barest amount of equipment and with minimal external logistic support.

<sup>82</sup> Other areas also needed to be staffed from that total of 32,000, including 21,500 soldiers for the support base and regular staff for the Reserve 2nd and 3rd divisions.

<sup>83</sup> AAHU, Senior Commanders Meetings Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders Meeting 1 August 1977, paragraphs 85–86.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraphs 32, 117.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 117.

Other problems were either created by TIB 28 or were left unresolved by it. In theory at least, the structure of the TIB 28 division was likely to create command problems on operations because the divisional headquarters was not staffed to manage the assigned armoured, artillery and logistic support forces, which were more rightly the responsibility of a corps headquarters. Even allowing for that, senior officers considered the divisional headquarters too large, immobile and vulnerable to attack.<sup>86</sup> In practice too, the field force mixed units usually considered corps troops within brigades, so that these bore little resemblance to the structure contained in doctrine. And perhaps most tellingly, TIB 28's 'standard' light infantry battalions did not allow Army to maintain expertise across a broad range of warfighting skills such as amphibious, mechanised and parachute operations. This factor was important because Army's leaders were keen to maintain the 'state of the art' in these areas as a means of ensuring that Army was well placed to mobilise in the event of a major war and keep pace with international developments in warfare.<sup>87</sup> Thus, even as Army implemented the interim TIB 28 division, its leaders recognised that it was an unsustainable structure and that further change would be required.

However, Army lacked a clear understanding of the way its force should be structured on mobilisation. To resolve this, General Dunstan initiated a review of Army goals, which became known as the Army Order of Battle (ORBAT) Study.<sup>88</sup> This study initially identified an objective force of 250,000 soldiers for full mobilisation — a force for operations on mainland Australia that could deploy elements overseas.<sup>89</sup> It would be organised into two corps with three 'standard' infantry divisions, one mechanised division, and one armoured division, along with corps and army troops. Because this force was significantly larger than the force-in-being of 1978, two intermediate objectives for expansion were identified. The first intermediate objective was a two-division force that could deploy one division with a 'slice' of corps troops, while the second and subsequent intermediate objective was a force capable of deploying two divisions with corps troops.<sup>90</sup> No timeline was set to meet these expansion objectives, although Babbage calculated that growing to the second intermediate objective with around 150,000 soldiers would take from 2.5 to 5 years.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1979, Vol. 2 – 'Australian Army Planning Order of Battle (ORBAT) Study, 1978, Stage 3 Part 1', Minute 5/1979, pp. 2–3.

<sup>87</sup> Defence, COSC Papers 1979 – CGS Minute to COSC, 'Army Development – Proposed Changes in the Field Force', CGS 825/1979, 17 September 1979, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> AAHU, Senior Commanders Meetings Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders Meeting 9–10 May 1978, paragraph 33. The task of identifying these goals had already been in progress for some time. In an Army Development Committee minute of 1977, it was noted that a relevant paper had been staffed to Director General-level on three occasions since October 1976. See AAHU, Army Development Committee Archive Papers 1977, Vol. 8 – Director General Army Development, 'ASO 1.2 – Structure of the Army', Submission 72/1977 and Minute 67/1977, p. 2. Army saw the importance of having these agreed prior to the conduct of 'core force studies'. See *ibid.*, Minute 72/1977, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1979, Vol. 2 – COPS, 'Australian Army Planning ORBAT Study, 1978 – Stage 3', Submission 29/78, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1978, Volume 3 – COPS, 'Australian Army Planning ORBAT Study Phases 1 and 2', Submission 17/78, 19 June 1978, pp. 3–5, 5–9.

<sup>91</sup> This time period was based on a starting point of 34,000 soldiers. Expansion to 250,000 would take from four to eight years. See

The structure of the infantry division was also reviewed, with the new recommended structure a significant reduction from the 18,000-strong TIB 28 division to a new formation of just under 13,000 soldiers. The new structure also removed almost all armoured vehicles to corps troops and around 25% of the general support vehicles from divisional units.<sup>92</sup> This new structure addressed some of the concerns apparent in the TIB 28 division and also made it easier for Army to staff and equip the new division with the available resources. But this still did not bring the doctrinal division into alignment with the reality of units on the ground. The need to incorporate corps troops units, particularly the likes of the 1st Armoured Regiment (tanks), 2nd Cavalry Regiment (armoured reconnaissance) and 8th/12th Medium Regiment (medium artillery) into a brigade remained out of kilter with a 'standard' infantry division.

The rejection of Army's proposed mobilisation ORBAT by the central elements of the Defence Department created another complication. In consultation during 1977, Army's Development Committee noted that 'Comment from Defence Central on the philosophy and content of the [Army ORBAT Study] indicated that they did not accept the general principles that it contained. DGAD believed that Defence Central has incorrectly misinterpreted [sic] Army's long term development objective as being the unlimited expansion of the Army now.'<sup>93</sup> This disagreement was created, in part, by the lack of government-endorsed strategic guidance. But it may also have been a symptom of the increasing conflict that marked defence decision-making in the era.<sup>94</sup>

Army leaders also recognised that there was no means of expanding the Army to achieve the objective force of five divisions from its existing force. At best, the 1st Division could provide the basis for expansion into the three standard infantry divisions, and the 1st Armoured Regiment — which was in the process of receiving its new Leopard tanks — could provide 'a limited capability for the development of long lead-time skills and doctrine associated with armoured warfare.'<sup>95</sup> The same paper also argued that the Australian Army did not have a

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Ross Babbage, 'Australia's Strategic Reorientation – Some Important Implications', pp. 11–12. Graeme Cheeseman identified the number of full-time soldiers dedicated to training new soldiers, the desired training standard for new soldiers, and the number of training battalions formed as important variables that governed the overall personnel growth of the mobilising Army. See Cheeseman, 'Army Force Development' in Ball and Langtry, *Problems of Mobilisation in Defence of Australia*, pp. 30–36. While plausible, these figures may have underestimated national mobilisation capacity given the experience of 1914–18 and 1939–45, when larger but less technologically dependent forces were raised.

<sup>92</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1979, Vol. 2 – 'The Australian Army Planning ORBAT Study 1978: Report on Stage 3, Step 3', Attachment to Submission 8/79, 10 April 1979, p. 1 and Annex A. This division entered into doctrine in 1981, albeit at a slightly larger size of 13,833 soldiers. See Manual of Land Warfare Part 1, Vol. 6, Pamphlet No. 2, *Aide-Memoire*, p. 1-3.

<sup>93</sup> AAHU, Army Development Committee Archive Papers 1977, Vol. 8 – Director General Army Development, 'ASO 1.2 – Structure of the Army', Submission 72/1977 and Minute 67/1977, p. 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Dibb recalled the situation in the mid-1980s as a 'Mexican stand-off' between the civilian and military elements of the organisation, with its leaders barely on speaking terms. See Brendan Nicholson, 'A bold plan we couldn't afford', *The Australian*, 31 December 2013. See also the literature on the 'bureaucratic politics' that characterised the Department of Defence in this period, such as Babbage, *Rethinking Australia's Defence*, pp. 125–27; David Evans, *A Fatal Rivalry: Australia's Defence at Risk*, MacMillan, South Melbourne, 1990; Russell Trood, 'Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy' in F.A. Mediansky (ed), *Australian Foreign Policy into the New Millennium*, MacMillan Education Australia, South Melbourne, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1980, Vol. 5 – Chief of Operations, 'Mechanisation within 1st Task Force', Submission 23/80, 15 December 1980, pp. 2–3.

similar repository for mechanised warfare, which created a significant hole in its mobilisation plan, or for the other specialised warfighting skills that it sought to develop. The answer to the challenge of mobilisation was developed, in part, through trials of specialised units.

### *Specialised units and formations also required choices*

While Army's doctrinal development was progressing through the new divisional structure and the results of the Army ORBAT Study, Army's combat units were involved in an extensive series of experiments to develop new structures and skills. These experiments included all the warfighting competencies identified by the Senior Officers Meeting in late 1973, and extended to new special forces and surveillance roles and units.

As the analysis conducted for the ORBAT Study demonstrated, the Australian Army lacked a truly 'mechanised' infantry capability. This capability mixed protected mobility and high volumes of fire from organic armoured personnel carriers with lightly equipped infantry. The need for this type of force was identified as a desirable capability by the commander of Field Force Command in late 1973.<sup>96</sup> The formal trial commenced in 1975 with around 25 carriers assigned to the 5th/7th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment, to equip one of its companies. The complement of vehicles was expanded soon after to lift the battalion and its supporting arms, but the trial was wound down in late 1976 due to budget constraints and concerns over its relationship with the newly introduced TIB 28 division.<sup>97</sup> The 5th/7th Battalion then reverted to its 'standard' structure, although it continued with more limited trials and a company lift capability was retained as budget priorities were debated.<sup>98</sup> It was not until 1981 that the mechanised capability was agreed and the 1st Task Force was re-roled to become a mechanised task force. This was primarily a result both of the ORBAT study, which recognised the deficiency in mechanised capability, and a number of successful exercises involving the partly mechanised 5th/7th Battalion, 1st Armoured Regiment, 2nd Cavalry Regiment and 8th/12th Medium Regiment.<sup>99</sup> Resources were a major concern at the time, and this meant that Army leaders believed that they might have to choose between the expensive mechanised force and a force that they considered had more utility — the parachute battalion.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>96</sup> AAHU, CGS Briefings and Senior Commanders Meetings Proceedings Vol. 1, 1972–1974 – Senior Commanders Meeting: Notes on Discussion, 27 November 1973, pp. 8–9. John Blaxland also noted the influence of US, Soviet and British thinking on the role of armoured warfare on officers at the time. Personal communication, 22 January 2014.

<sup>97</sup> AAHU, Senior Commanders Meeting, Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders Meeting 9–10 May 1977, paragraph 59.

<sup>98</sup> AAHU, Senior Commanders Meeting, Vol. 3, 1977–80 – Senior Commanders Meeting 27–28 November 1978, paragraphs 34–37; AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1980, Vol. 5 – Chief of Operations, 'Mechanisation within 1st Task Force', Submission 23/80, 15 December 1980, p. 3 and Minute 62/1980, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> AAHU, CGSAC Proceedings 1980, Vol. 5 – 'Mechanisation within 1st Task Force', Minute 62/1980, 15 December 1980, p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> AAHU, Senior and/or District Commanders Meetings 1981 – Senior Commanders Meeting Contents Part 2, 4–5 May 1981, paragraph 15.

The foundation of this belief concerning the greater utility of a parachute battalion — ‘by Defence, and particularly government’ — lay in its perceived role of seizing and holding threatened onshore locations and offshore territories quickly, particularly during low-level operations.<sup>101</sup> Despite this perception, Army fell almost accidentally into a parachute capability because the first initiative to train in this way came from a unit commander, rather than direction from a higher headquarters.<sup>102</sup> This resulted in one company of the 6th Battalion becoming parachute trained. It did not, however, gain authorisation to operate as a parachute company until 1980. This status was not to last long, as responsibility for the newly authorised parachute battalion task was transferred to the 3rd Battalion in 1982, primarily because of that unit’s more favourable location.<sup>103</sup> As a result, the newly mechanised 1st Task Force also commanded a light-scales parachute unit for a period.

General Dunstan’s concerns over close-country warfare expertise and readiness were addressed by changes to the Townsville-based 3rd Task Force in 1979. While the organisation and training of this formation did not change significantly — except for an increased focus on air movement — its level of resourcing increased dramatically after 1977. Prior to this, the Australian Army’s three regular task forces had rotated the responsibility for maintaining a battalion at ‘ready to deploy’ status on a quarterly basis. Now the 3rd Task Force would have sole responsibility for providing a company (around 120 strong) on 24 hours’ notice to move for deployment. This requirement was expanded in 1979 to a battalion at short notice with the task force and an assigned logistic battalion now designated the ‘Operational Deployment Force’. The task force had only two infantry battalions at this stage, but was able to ‘call upon’ the 3rd Battalion if required.<sup>104</sup>

This last change was made public in 1981 when Defence Minister Killen announced that Army’s three regular task forces would be given specialised tasks. To complement the 3rd Task Force’s specialisation in close-country warfare and secondary skills in seaborne deployment, the Brisbane-based 6th Task Force would become a ‘medium weight’ formation. This specialisation recognised its larger allocation — in theory — of vehicles and its requirement to be the Army’s repository of expertise in light infantry skills in operations in open country and urban terrain. Building on the mechanisation specialisation, the Sydney-based 1st Task Force would become the ‘heavy’ formation and develop the mechanised

<sup>101</sup> AAHU, Senior and/or District Commanders Meetings 1981 – Senior Commanders Meeting Contents Part 2, 4–5 May 1981, paragraph 17.

<sup>102</sup> Ian Kuring, *Redcoat to Camo: A History of the Australian Infantry 1788-2001*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, NSW, 2003, p. 385.

<sup>103</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, p. 329. The Royal Australian Air Force’s C-130 aircraft were also located in Sydney, while the Parachute Training School was located slightly further south at Nowra.

<sup>104</sup> The 3rd Battalion came under command of the 3rd Task Force (by then redesignated the 3rd Brigade) in 1986.

specialisation described above. The 1st Task Force would also be expected to provide the others with tank support in training.<sup>105</sup> These changes to Army's roles were explained in the 1982 publication *The Army of the 1980s*, which was an attempt by Dunstan's successor as CGS, Lieutenant General Sir Phillip Bennett, to publicly explain the modern Army's contribution to the nation's defence.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to the priority given to the ARA division, Army also invested more in the development of its special forces. While the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) had performed with distinction in Vietnam, its expertise in close-country operations was not ostensibly acknowledged in the defence of Australia. Thus, while the other ARA formations were still preparing for operations in conventional warfare settings, the SASR moved to justify its position by developing skills in long-range reconnaissance. The SASR role expanded following the 1978 Hilton Hotel bomb incident, which brought domestic counter-terrorism within the scope of Defence priorities. In addition to raising the Counter-Terrorism Squadron within the Perth-based SASR, the Army's part-time 1st Commando Regiment (based in Sydney and Melbourne) also began to develop counter-terrorist capabilities.<sup>107</sup> Surveillance capabilities in the north of Australia were also enhanced with the raising of Norforce in 1981 as a reserve unit that drew heavily on local indigenous people.<sup>108</sup>

These force structure changes established the broad design for the Australian Army from the early 1980s through to the early 2010s. With these pieces in place, the Australian Army was now an organisation that was well placed for expansion. It was also able to deploy some forces on operations at short notice and could, with preparation, contribute to medium intensity operations that required firepower and armoured protection. This contrasted sharply with the Defence Central view that the Army should be structured for low-level operations in northern Australia and the offshore territories and, as a secondary task, provide an expansion base. The 'specialised' force structure setting was vastly different to the identically organised infantry battalions of the Vietnam War era. The reasons for this will be discussed in the next section in terms of 'risk management'.

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<sup>105</sup> Defence, COSC Papers 1979 – CGS 825/1979, 'Army Development – Proposed Changes in the Field Force', 17 September 1979, pp. 13–14.

<sup>106</sup> Australian Army, *The Army in the 1980s*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1982.

<sup>107</sup> D.M. Horner, *Phantoms of the Jungle*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1991, Chapters 22 and 23.

<sup>108</sup> Kuring, *Redcoats to Cams*, p. 390.

# SPECIALISED BRIGADES AS A RISK MANAGEMENT TOOL

The Australian Army's decision environment following the Vietnam War was marked by significant uncertainty. This uncertainty had a major influence on the ability of Army leaders to achieve their objective of creating an Army that could meet its country's defence needs. The effect of uncertainty on objectives is known today as risk.<sup>109</sup>

Army's leaders of the 1970s faced three major sources of risk. The first was Army's fluctuating and inevitably diminishing budget position. This risk was not only shared with Defence as a whole, it was compounded by a significant shift in investment priorities within the defence budget towards maritime forces (see Chart 1). The second source of risk was the lack of agreed strategic guidance during the period. While the tasks in the 1976 White Paper were clear, the priorities were contested. Adding to this was the inability to identify an adversary that Australia's armed forces could prepare to meet. This ambiguity was exploited by Army's leaders, using their significant but increasingly residual institutional autonomy, to develop a force structure that met the priorities for conventional operations and short-notice tasks in an environment of reduced threat. The third source of risk — which is far more controversial — will be discussed following some explanation of these first two sources.

Army's force structure response to the risks generated by its budget situation began with the objective of 'saving the silverware' rather than a return to its pre-Vietnam structure of three infantry battalions. Army attempted to achieve this goal by adjusting resources so that it could retain the divisional structure of nine infantry battalions that had existed during the time of conscription and the Vietnam War. This response appears to have represented an attempt by Army's leaders to sustain the structural gains of the 1960s, and to protect a new legacy in the form of the achievements and nascent traditions of the Royal Australian Regiment. Retaining nine infantry battalions would also help justify and promote the division as the formation considered best suited to modern warfare. As a response to a rapidly changing situation, this approach was unsophisticated and, for the most part, unsuccessful.

As the decade unfolded, Army's leaders adopted a different approach to absorb the uncertainty of Army's tasking priorities and the enemy it might face. This approach sought to address the institution's perceived risks in a decision

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<sup>109</sup> See ISO 31000: 2009, *Risk Management – Principle and Guidelines*.

environment that did not contain an obvious threat — a key to accurate force structure planning — and a diminishing and uncertain resource base.

Specialised brigades were a key element of that response because they spread the risk for Army. Essentially, if Army could not prepare its entire force to face an identified enemy — as it had in wartime — it would maintain the ‘state of the art’ and perhaps deploy a small contingent that could survive in a given setting.<sup>110</sup> That the threat to Australia was considered benign at the time both enabled and prompted that response.

Being able to expand through mobilisation was another important objective for Army at this time. Army’s leaders managed that risk by maintaining skills in light infantry, mechanised and armoured operations, while maintaining a capability for other specialised activities such as special operations and air defence. The mobilisation imperative also allowed both the ARA and Army Reserve (as the CMF was unofficially renamed in 1975) to claim a role in the mobilisation process, ensuring a degree of internal harmony. This resulted in Army spreading its resources ever more thinly across a broad range of skills and units using the ‘core force’ philosophy embraced by Defence during this period.

Army’s leaders balanced the requirement for mobilisation with the potential for short notice contingencies by resourcing the 3rd Task Force in Townsville to provide a battalion at short notice. This formation was structured so that it could be deployed over long distances by air and sea, which gave it significant utility for both the defence of Australia and contingency operations in the near region. In addition, Army’s leaders were also able to ensure that the skills developed through the conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s were maintained by setting the primary training task for the 3rd Task Force as close-country warfare. This combination of readiness, mobility and skills was also designed to provide a reasonable contribution to an allied force elsewhere in the world, if required.

However, this change meant that Army could not sustain or rotate an entire brigade with two or three battalions on a protracted operation. While this might fall within the parameters of an acceptable risk, the extant force structure of specialised brigades created a significant limitation in terms of the size of commitment and number of simultaneous commitments that Australia could make to any conflict. Essentially, this force structure meant that, during the late 1970s, Australia was limited to deploying one or perhaps two infantry battalions at a time.

This structure fell far short of the three ‘like’ organisations — the number required to sustain a commitment over a long period of time. To compound

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<sup>110</sup> Palazzo comes to a similar conclusion. See *The Australian Army*, pp. 328–29.

the problem, even rotating the first force would require a massive injection of resources into the only other suitable force, the 6th Task Force (Brigade) in Brisbane, which remained significantly under strength during this period. In addition, a number of the command support capabilities (such as intelligence) and logistic units required to deploy and sustain a force were also either under strength or absent. While this allocation of priorities was adequate for a time, the deficiencies of this approach became apparent once the tempo of Australian military operations began to increase from the late 1980s.<sup>111</sup>

This structure meant, in practical terms, that the 32,000-strong Australian Army of the 1980s was an 'army of ones'. In essence, there was no ability to rotate forces unless deployments were set for at least 12 months (and perhaps more). Even a call-up of reserves would have been difficult at the time due to the existing legislation. So the Australian Army of the 1970s was probably no better placed than the 20,000-strong Army of the early 1960s to provide military options to the government and to sustain a commitment over time.

The uncertainty surrounding resources and lack of agreed guidance were two major and clear sources of risk. But the actions and priorities of Army's leaders at the time show evidence of a third source — that the government's strategic guidance would leave them unable to cope with modern conflict should Army be called to fight. While the 1973 conversation among Army's senior leaders cited previously provides only the merest insight into the thinking of the day, it clearly supports this claim.<sup>112</sup> Further evidence is apparent in the way the TIB 28 division was heavily armed for conventional warfare and the fact that it was not designed to perform in a dispersed fashion, which would be essential for the defence of Australia mission. Still further support for this claim is evident in the training focus of the time, based on the conventional phases of war.<sup>113</sup> This latter mode of training and operations generally relies on the concentration of units and firepower — often the opposite of what would be required in a defence of Australia setting. It was this third source of risk that prevented the Australian Army from aligning the division in doctrine with the reality of the units physically on the order of battle at the time.

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<sup>111</sup> Breen, *Struggling for Self Reliance*, pp. 162–63; Blaxland, *The Australian Army From Whitlam to Howard*, pp. 163–64; The Auditor-General, *Management of Australian Defence Force Deployments to East Timor*, Australian National Audit Office Audit Report No. 38, Canberra, 2001–02, 2002, pp. 52–62, 86–88.

<sup>112</sup> See footnote 71. This conversation occurred 12 months after the new Labor government took power and after Strategic Basis 1973 had been released.

<sup>113</sup> Both the 6th Task Force and the 3rd Task Force were focused on this type of training, as was most of the training conducted in military schools in the 1980s–1990s (author's observation).

# INSIGHTS FOR ARMY'S CONTEMPORARY MODERNISATION PLANS

This paper is not a critique of Army's current force structure initiative, Plan Beersheba, or its future force structure plan. But an examination of the 1970s provides some insights into the enduring challenge of force structuring and how it is a tool for risk management.

Force structure designers face a very significant challenge when there is no clear adversary. In an unambiguous threat environment, decisions on the scale of forces required, their operating environment and the level of that threat are often far less complex. Outside times of major conflict however, the available guidance is unlikely to be precise. The forces of the 1970s — and to a certain extent today's — do not have such a clear focus. Indeed, it can be potentially destabilising to acknowledge the existence of an adversary in 'peacetime' as this can heighten tensions and may create a competitive military development spiral.

The inherent difficulty of maintaining a force for current contingences and mobilisation also needs to be carefully considered in future force planning. In contrast to the current modernisation plans which focus on sustaining at least two commitments over a long period of time, Army's leaders of the 1970s clearly placed a high priority on force expansion.<sup>114</sup> This was based on their assessment of the greatest risk in the 1970s and perhaps reflects the experience of World War II more than the Vietnam era. This decision had significant consequences for resourcing, for it led to an unrealistic divisional structure and decisions that resulted in considerable 'hollowness' in the force-in-being.<sup>115</sup>

Force structure planners need to find an appropriate organising principle to allow them to create consistency, assign priorities and maintain options for government. The 1970s answer to this was the 'core force'; others saw 'credible contingencies' and a 'repertoire of missions' as alternative force-structuring principles.<sup>116</sup> Articulating the chosen concept must be a priority, and it should be supported with evidence from experimentation or (more costly) field trials.

While the officers of the 1970s appear not to have used the risk management approach described above, this label provides an appropriate means of describing their thinking and actions. However, their approach was stymied by its lack

<sup>114</sup> Australian Army, *The Army Objective Force 2030 – Primer*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2011, Part 3, especially p. 42.

<sup>115</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 332.

<sup>116</sup> See respectively, The Australian Army, *Restructuring the Australian Army*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1996, in the context of the Army 21 Review; Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, pp. 52–55; Alan Hinge, *Australian Defence Preparedness: Principles, Problems and Prospects: Introducing Repertoire of Missions (ROMINS) a Practical Path to Australian Defence Preparedness*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra, 2000.

of acceptance within the Department of Defence. Clearly, Army's 1978 plan for a 250,000-strong 'objective force' was rejected rather than 'misinterpreted' by defence planners. While it is difficult to establish causation, this planning appears to have been politically costly for Army as some of its assumptions and implications were soon to be attacked by Dr Dibb in his 1985 review.<sup>117</sup>

The last insight is obvious to those who work in a strategic-level headquarters, but it bears restating: resources are everything. It is the job of the strategic planner to understand resources, costs and trade-offs. Yet this still seems only generally understood within Army, and officer education in this dark art really only occurs on the job.

These insights point to two developmental areas that today's Army leaders should consider more closely. The first is an investment in advocacy when the budget appears volatile or is diminishing. Army's leaders in the 1970s appeared unable to prevail in the debate over strategy. Perhaps that was a sign of the times; on the other hand, perhaps it was a sign that they did not fully understand that their institutional autonomy was receding. Understanding competing strategic concepts and then arguing the case is critical to ensuring that Army is organised and resourced for its primary tasks.

The second suggestion is less controversial and concerns education for strategic staff and leadership. At present, Army devotes significant resources to teaching operational and tactical-level skills to its officers, while only a few selected officers are sent on the year-long course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies. The remaining staff officers receive little more than an introduction to the budget processes and the workings of government until they experience that environment first hand. It is worth doing more on both counts.

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<sup>117</sup> This applies in particular to those that concerned the 'objective force' and the need for armoured forces and medium artillery. See Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, pp. 83–84, 86.

# CONCLUSION

This study began with two main questions concerning the Australian Army's inability to reconcile its preferred doctrinal structure with its reality, and the reasons its leaders chose to create specialised brigades in 1979–80.

The key to answering these questions lies in the way Army's leaders of the day viewed risk. Since their decision environment was benign in terms of threat, volatile in terms of resourcing and contested in terms of policy, Army's leaders chose to focus on the 'worst case' as a means of managing the resulting high level of uncertainty. That worst case required an ability to expand rapidly to fight a conventional war overseas. Evidence of this focus is apparent in the way Army's leaders fought to retain the division as the basis of its force, created a doctrinal divisional structure that was suited to that style of conflict, and based its force structure planning on expansion to a five-division-strong force — its primary mobilisation goal.

Resources are also a key factor in the inability to reconcile the division in doctrine with the division in reality. In the 1970s, the Australian Army had insufficient regular forces to create a standard infantry division, and it needed suitable command arrangements for its many armoured and specialised combat units. As a result, Army incorporated a number of 'corps troops' units within its brigades, which made the real-life organisations very different to those described in Army's doctrine manuals.

The risk management approach also saw Army adopt specialised brigades as a means to build the necessary infantry, mechanised and armoured divisions in the event of mobilisation for a major conflict. In order to meet possible contingencies, one of the specialised brigades was resourced and tasked as a light-scales, tropical warfare formation that could effectively sustain one battalion on operations until other formations could be brought up to readiness. In structuring the Australian Army around specialised brigades, its leaders of the 1970s hoped to maximise their ability to meet the worst case scenario they envisaged. But they ultimately created an army that was very hollow and poorly placed to deploy or sustain operations overseas.

Indeed, it was operational experience — in the form of the 1999 deployment to East Timor and the series of concurrent operational deployments to East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, Solomon Islands and in border protection — that

demonstrated how unsuited the specialised task forces were to sustaining a protracted commitment because of their inability to rotate formed groups. In addition, Army's force structure in general was readily criticised as 'ill-prepared to respond to a low-level emergency', insufficient as an expansion base and deficient in logistic support.<sup>118</sup> The choices made in the 1970s also left Army — and the whole Defence organisation — woefully unprepared for the joint operations that would be launched from the late 1980s to the 2000s.<sup>119</sup> A new solution was required, and that solution has been conceived and implemented as similarly structured multi-role combat brigades through Plan Beersheba.

Beersheba will not be the final word on Army's force structure. Technology, resource levels and strategic settings will change over the coming decades, and this change will require Army's leaders to continually assess, shape or adapt their decision environment. Army's leaders today would do well to invest in suitable forms of research and advocacy to ensure that government policy is informed by quality debate on the issue of strategy and force structure.

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<sup>118</sup> Palazzo, *The Australian Army*, pp. 332–33.

<sup>119</sup> Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard*, pp. 63–64, 68–71; Bob Breen, *Struggling for Self Reliance*, pp. 48–50 and Chapter 12.

# NOTES

# NOTES

