

**ORDER OF AUSTRALIA - ADF ORATION 2013**  
**FORMER SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMANDER AUSTRALIA**  
**MAJOR GENERAL P.W. 'GUS' GILMORE AO, DSC**

Casting back, I think of how fortunate I have been to work with many great people in some fantastically challenging places. In Afghanistan in 2001 we confronted an 'unknown, austere' environment. I remember studying 'Microsoft Maps' and a 'Lonely Planets Guide' on my flight across the Indian Ocean to increase my understanding of a country that had really only been in Australia's recent consciousness through news reports of the failed Russian invasion a decade before. By 2010, much more was 'known' about our operating environment, but the challenges were immense.

While the public has, on rare occasion, glimpsed some of the achievements of those Australian service men and women who contributed to 23 rotations of the Special Operations Task Group, I am not convinced that we have yet done enough to tell their story. They were engaged almost daily in combat operations. To provide some insight, I would like to describe on SAS patrol in 2010, during which an SAS Trooper was killed in action and following which an SAS Sergeant was awarded the Star of Gallantry for his actions on that day (*SAS Patrol vignette*).

But this is just one story, from one of thousands of missions conducted by Australia's Special Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 13 years; and while little is known about the extent of that work, I contend that many in this room and across Australia more broadly are equally unfamiliar with the work of our Special Operations Forces beyond Afghanistan over the past 10 years.

Just as we have been sending our SAS Troopers, Commandos, Specialist Engineers and others from Special Operations Command, to undertake combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001; so too have we been sending our Special Forces to engage with our partners and allies in our region and beyond. Last year Special Operations Command conducted more than 50 major bilateral activities with 22 other nations. On any one day, Special Operations Command will have people working in around ten countries around the world collaborating with partners and allies to build capabilities, to promote understanding, and to strengthen relationships. This perhaps lesser known function of Special Operations Command is one that I will return to later on.

But before I turn to the topic of my oration today, which is the future of Special Forces, I would like to briefly reflect on the past:

- Personal Reflections on command (*Troop command 1989 [commanding an SAS Troop in Australia and PNG], Regimental command 2001-02 [immediately post-East Timor and during 9/11] and Formation command [2010 commanding ISAF SOF in Afghanistan]*).
- 1993 era (*UN missions Somalia/Rwanda – HF Radios with One Time Pads to protect our communications. We navigated with compasses and paper maps, we would occasionally wear flack jackets and generally drove unprotected land rovers*);
- 2013 era (*Operationally experienced force / Digital, high bandwidth communications supported by personal digital assistants / modular weapons systems with sophisticated night vision devices / Airborne ISR / Protected Mobility, force protection and CIED equipment*).

When you think about the scale of that evolution, the question that arises is, 'how did we get here'? Was it through good planning, was it due to good luck, or was it driven by world

events? If you subscribe to the view that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity<sup>1</sup>, which I do, then I contend that we have evolved as we have through a combination of deliberate planning, coupled with an agility and versatility to adapt to changing circumstances. In this vein, therefore, it is logical to consider what might lie ahead before I consider how we might posture for the future.

### **Future Land Warfare**

While the challenges in attempting to predict the future are clear, endeavouring to do so is just as important for Special Forces as it is for Army and Defence. So it is perhaps sensible for me to begin by describing how our Army perceives the future.

The Australian Army's *Future Land Warfare Report* contends that there are certain trends and drivers which will affect the character of future land warfare, and that understanding these helps to ensure that the future Army is able to provide the broadest range of options for government.

The *Future Land Warfare Report* draws from a number of sources, including *Australia's National Security Strategy*, to assess that in 2025 our adversaries could range from a major power, terrorists, and non-state actors, to a collection of ad hoc and irregular forces<sup>2</sup>. They could be a combination of state and non-state actors and may operate across the spectrum of conflict<sup>3</sup>. These adversaries will be adaptable and change their operational approach based on experience. The most sophisticated enemy will be capable of coordinating a multi-dimensional, multi-domain campaign against Australia. We might expect a major power adversary to employ ballistic missiles, a suite of air, sea and ground-launched precision guided weapons, advanced manned and unmanned platforms, and space warfare capabilities. It may also employ offensive cyber capabilities to degrade our use of technology.

Regardless of the nature of our adversary, (state or non-state based), future conflict will display the trends of diffusion and lethality coupled with the proliferation of technologies and ideas in a disaggregated battle space.

In this environment, the *Future Land Warfare Report* concludes that Future war fighting will demand integrated joint forces, decision superiority and kinetic overmatch. These elements will form the conceptual basis for how Army fights in war and should inform our future capability initiatives. Future war will involve a wider spectrum of activity than has previously been the case. Thus, it will demand new skills and capabilities which will be defined, in part, by the changing nature of the operating environment.

### **Turning to SOF and our immediate future**

Having considered this view, I would like to shift back from 2025 to consider our nearer term outlook. I suggest that in the short to mid term, a number of other factors are emerging.

The first of these is the dominant economic environment. Here at home our current Defence funding sits at around 1.6% of GDP. Further afield, many EU nations are facing dire national debts. In this era of austerity, it is reasonable to assume that a key question for any decision maker will be: 'what is the cost?' Therefore, a focus on efficiency in delivering an effect will remain a critical consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Seneca, 4BC-65AD

<sup>2</sup> Australia National Security Strategy, 2013, Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security

<sup>3</sup> AC-FLOC, *ibid*, p.6, defines the spectrum of conflict as humanitarian assistance through peace support to counter insurgency to conventional war.

Peter Jennings, the Chair of the *Australian Security Policy Institute*, recently built upon this economic theme when he described three sets of ‘key transitions’ that would need to be dealt with in the short term.

- Firstly, he described the ‘operational transition’ from Afghanistan. For our Special Forces, who initially deployed into Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks late in 2001, this will see a shift in operational tempo with the numbers of Australian Special Forces serving in Afghanistan reducing from a standing average of about 350 personnel to a fraction of that number by the end of this year.
- Secondly, he described the ‘strategic transition’, of a Defence Force and a National Security architecture adjusting from a decade long commitment to a period of potential peace and preparedness.
- Finally, and immutably linked to these transition themes, he contemplated the impact of a potentially diminished level of public interest in Defence and security issues as we emerge from the end of what has been called ‘the 9/11 decade’.

A second potential factor which was offered by a recently retired British General at a conference in NATO earlier this year, suggested the possibility of a reduced bias for action in the international community – and recent events in Syria have reinforced this perspective. He opined that on the one hand you have a degree of ‘national fatigue’ in western countries following a decade of war, which is only further accentuated by the impact of the global fiscal environment. Combined, he contends, these factors will contribute to a diminished bias for action with a preference for missions with tightly defined objectives and timeframes; and a shift from ‘destroying’ an enemy to ‘preventive paralysation’ to keep threats at bay while indigenous elements lead the ‘stabilisation phase.’ Of course, while this is only one person’s view, he cites the examples of the recent French intervention in Mali and the US action in Libya as two examples of this trend.

None of this undermines the fundamental requirement for a strong and robust Defence Force. As the *Defence White Paper 2013* highlights: ‘profound strategic changes occurring across our region are altering the global strategic system’ and the ‘core of Australia’s national security lies (with) the ADF, whose purpose is to deter or defeat attacks on our territory.’ But the *White Paper* also speaks of Defence’s role in contributing ‘to the stability and security of Australia’s immediate region’ and in shaping ‘an international environment favourable to Australia’s future.’ Importantly, ‘the *White Paper* reflects the priority Government places on our people and our partnerships as vital components and enablers of Australia’s Defence capability.’

In this environment, where efficiency and return on investment are essential, where precision in delivery of effect is vital, and where the bias for preserving stability and security is clear, I suggest that a number of important drivers for the future of our Special Forces start to emerge.

COL Berne Horn, the Director of Training & Education at the *Canadian Defence Academy* contends that this environment requires troops that are situationally aware, strategically adept and able to ‘ground truth’; soldiers that are ‘culturally familiar’ and ‘interagency comfortable’, able to work with others to achieve outcomes; and discreet elements operating with surgical precision to apply both kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities. This balance between ‘kinetic’ and ‘non-kinetic’, or ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’, or ‘hard power’ and ‘soft power’, is something that I will return to shortly. Suffice to say at this point, that the requirement to balance between platform and human capabilities, and kinetic and non-kinetic actions, often simultaneously or in quick succession, will demand that versatility, agility and adaptability remain key features of our Special Forces into the future.

Other deductions that we might be able to draw from consideration of this emergent environment may be to recognise the importance of:

- Being able to work through, by and with indigenous elements in diverse and sometimes hostile areas to achieve solutions. This requires not only an element of cultural understanding and linguistic familiarity, but also integral situational awareness and force protection capabilities to rapidly assess and, if necessary, adapt and respond to challenges.
- Being able to achieve joint effects drawn from all elements of national power. This ability to collaborate with other services, departments, agencies and organisations working to a common national goal, but often through alternate means and ways, will remain a key requirement for success.
- And, being able to work with forward deployed partners, who may well bring divergent perspectives and disparate capabilities to contribute to an agreed aim, will be vital to success.

It would be easy for me to pause here to contend that our current Special Forces are ideally suited to operate effectively in this future environment. We are fortunate to be able specifically select our Special Forces personnel from the ranks of a highly capable ADF. We invest a huge amount of time in training our people, to provide them with a vast array of skills covering everything from explosives to languages. We then provide them with equipment which is often at the cutting edge of technology, and we seek to engender in them a mindset that drives them in a relentless pursuit of excellence.

They have experience at operating with indigenous elements through our international engagement program, they are comfortable working with other government agencies through their domestic counter terrorist role and they have habitual relationships with Army, Navy and Air Force; quite simply because they are so reliant on the joint capabilities that the Services sustain.

But this would underestimate the potential challenges that lie ahead.

### **The Future of Special Forces**

So what are some of the things that I think that our Special Forces need to do?

- We must be prepared to shake off, or at least place in perspective, some of the paradigms formed in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past 10 years. While our Special Forces must remain capable of conducting sophisticated ‘Direct Action’ missions, there is no doubt that SOF’s public face of a ‘find, fix and finish’ focus from large bases, with CASEVAC support within 60 minutes and established local and regional relationships, has skewed internal and external perspectives of the utility of SOF. It will be important for our Special Forces to be prepared to operate in an environment of ‘strategic broken play’ which is:
  - less structured,
  - where understanding of the host nation’s conditions and environmental circumstances is diminished,
  - where the political risk is drawn from first principles rather than established circumstances,
  - where the degree of isolation and austerity mean that less support is available – particularly comprehensive situational awareness resulting from reduced ISR resources, and
  - where a high degree of Versatility, Agility and Adaptability will enable our Special Forces to operate effectively within our national policy, legal, mandate and resourcing framework.
- We must be equally able to work with our partners to preserve stability and security wherever our national interests are engaged:
  - In this environment the quality and training of our people will be crucial. The ADF has a proven ability to work with indigenous forces to build capacity and to promote

stability, and this is a key area where our talented Special Forces must have a leading role.

- We must consider how we engage with regional security forces in countries with difficult political environments just as we must continue to institutionalise Defence relationships with partners from across government. This ability to engage in a nuanced way, in support of Australia's diplomatic efforts and in common pursuit of our national interests will be an increasingly valuable tool.
- The shared understanding and acceptance developed through this collective approach will only heighten Australia's strategic anticipation, which is the acme of national security readiness.
- We must also be able to work closely with our friends and allies where our interests align. Australia has been the beneficiary of a close interaction with other nations' Special Forces in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. We have learnt much from each other and have seen the benefits of collaboration and cooperation. It will be important to reflect on the benefit of select partnerships, particularly within the Special Forces community, as we look to the challenges of the future. A proactive approach to international engagement will enable strategic anticipation, which may, in turn, reduce the prospect of future conflict.
- On the personnel front we must review how we continue to recruit and retain from a generation of current soldiers and potential recruits that have watched our Special Forces deploy on operations for almost 15 years. At the same time, we have a duty of care to ensure that we continue to look after our soldiers and veterans, who have committed so selflessly to those deployments. This has been a key focus of ours for a number of years, and it is vital that it remains a priority in the years ahead.
- Finally, we must accept that Special Operations Forces cannot be created once a crisis has occurred. To simply select and train a Special Forces soldier today takes more than a year. To develop the collective capability to prosecute our nation's most sensitive missions can take decades; and this includes not only the soldier, but also those critical 'enablers' resident across Defence. There is no doubt that the capabilities of Australia's Special Forces have taken a leap forward through their engagement on operations over this last decade. If those capabilities are not to regress, we will require careful investment in key integral and enabling capabilities to ensure that Australia continues to have a Special Forces capability which is amongst the best in the world.

So the challenges that lie ahead are by no means trivial, but nor are they unmanageable. We are fortunate to have such a capable and formidable Special Forces capability upon which to build. But the future, as always, is uncertain. While we might be able to determine certain trends and drivers which may shape our future operating environment, no one can precisely determine how they might manifest.

What is clear is that the 'core of Australia's national security lies (with) the ADF'. As I mentioned earlier, the *Defence White Paper* directs a role for the ADF in not only deterring and defeating attacks on our territory, but also in contributing 'to the stability and security of Australia's immediate region' and in shaping 'an international environment favourable to Australia's future.'

Against this challenge, I contend that Australia's Special Forces are ideally placed to meaningfully contribute. They are versatile, agile and adaptable; and they have a solid and proven foundation upon which to evolve into the future. We place a high priority on our people and I see them, and the partnerships they are able to engender, as being vital components of Australia's future Defence capability. [END]