

## Chapter 3

### Lead Up to Operation *Morris Dance*

Australia's defence posture was changing during the years before the conduct of Operation *Morris Dance* in May 1987. The Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, began a renewed effort to clarify Australia's military strategy in February 1985. He appointed Paul Dibb, an academic at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at The Australian National University and former Deputy Director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) and Head of the National Assessments staff, as a 'Ministerial Consultant'. He issued terms of reference for him to examine and report on the content, priorities and rationale for defence forward planning and to advise on what capabilities were appropriate for Australia's present and future defence requirements.<sup>1</sup> Dibb presented his report in 1986.<sup>2</sup> He advocated projecting credible military power nationally and regionally.<sup>3</sup> He recommended a self-reliant and 'layered' national defence strategy that would defend the approaches to the Australian national hinterland.<sup>4</sup> For that, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) needed to be capable of projecting military force both nationally—from the southern and eastern coastal heartlands to the western and northern coastal hinterlands—and offshore. He clarified what capabilities each Service needed within the context of credible contingencies, putting first priority on defending Australian territorial sovereignty through national force projection and pre-positioning force elements and military infrastructure in Australia's northern and western hinterland.<sup>5</sup> He also incorporated regional and international force projection by leaving open 'an option to make modest military contributions in support of our more distant diplomatic interests and the military efforts of others'.<sup>6</sup>

The Dibb Report set the scene for and informed the White Paper, *The Defence of Australia 1987*.<sup>7</sup> It explained Australia's strategic posture for defending sea and air approaches to the mainland: a blueprint for defence-in-depth as well as national and regional force projection.<sup>8</sup> The ADF needed to be 'able to track and target an adversary and able to mount sea and air operations throughout the area [of direct military interest] [as well as have] range, endurance, and mobility, and independent logistic support'.<sup>9</sup> The two 'fundamental elements' of this posture were maintaining and developing capabilities for the independent defence of Australia and its interests, and promoting strategic stability and security in Australia's area of direct military interest.<sup>10</sup> It summarised strategic intentions with the following words:

Australia's combined air, land and sea forces can secure our continent against any possible aggressor. Equally, those forces will have the capacity to support regional security too. They will be well-suited to supporting Australia's regional role. Long range ships, submarines and aircraft, and highly mobile ground forces, will enable us to play our proper role in the region, and if necessary, beyond it.<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of force command, Dibb supported an increase in the power of the CDF over the Service chiefs.<sup>12</sup> He wrote that 'a framework of functional commands should be developed so that peacetime arrangements more closely reflect the Joint Service requirements for credible contingencies'.<sup>13</sup>

In the same month that Dibb released his report, the CDF, General Sir Phillip Bennett, issued a directive to the Service chiefs and the three environmental commanders.<sup>14</sup> The CDF would command the Services through Headquarters Australian Defence Force (HQ ADF) and appoint joint force commanders for operations.<sup>15</sup> The Service chiefs and the environmental commanders (Maritime, Land and Air commanders) would be the enablers of national, regional and international force projection. They would sometimes command operations that predominantly favoured one environment and the dominant use of a particular Service's force elements. Generically, the army would continue to maintain 3rd Brigade in Townsville at high readiness for deployment. The navy and the air force would also keep selected vessels and aircraft on short notice to move.

General Peter Gratton succeeded Bennett in April 1987. He inherited Bennett's aspirations for the CDF to command Australia's joint and single Service operations. He also found himself putting Bennett's recent directives into practice for an urgent regional force projection. As had been the case with the Espiritu Santo secessionist rebellion in the emerging South Pacific nation of Vanuatu in mid-1980, a political crisis arose quickly and unexpectedly—this time in Fiji.<sup>16</sup> On 14 May 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, Chief of Operations, and an armed and masked group of Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) soldiers walked into the chamber of the Fijian parliament while it was in session and escorted the newly-elected Prime Minister, Dr Timoci Bavadra, and all of the members of his government at gunpoint to waiting trucks. Members of the RFMF then drove them to Queen Elizabeth Barracks and put them into protected accommodation.<sup>17</sup> Rabuka announced that he was temporarily assuming control of both the Fijian Government and the RFMF. This was a polite, firm but bloodless coup accompanied by assurances that it would not presage violence and that everyone in Fiji should remain calm and go about their business as normal. Patrick Walters, reporting first-hand from Suva, described it 'as probably the most polite coup in history' and 'was expected as much as one in Canberra would be'.<sup>18</sup>

In response to these events, the Fijian Governor General, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, declared a state of emergency and stated that he had taken over executive power under the provisions of the constitution. The commander of the RFMF, Brigadier Epeli Nailatikau, who was in Australia at the time, told journalists that he would fly back to Fiji and take command of the RFMF. For their parts, the Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, the Australian Opposition Leader, John Howard, and the New Zealand Prime Minister, David Lange, deplored what Hawke described simply as, 'the first military coup against an elected government in the South Pacific'.<sup>19</sup> Hawke, Howard and Lange dismissed military intervention to restore the Bavadra Government. Lange left open a military response option however by suggesting that New Zealand would consider participating in a regional military response to 'a cry from a legitimate government'.<sup>20</sup>

At midnight on 14 May 1987 Rabuka announced in a radio broadcast that he had suspended the Fijian Constitution, abolished the position of Governor General and also suspended the commander of the RFMF and his chief of staff. He would brook no opposition to the coup. In the interim he had appointed a Council of Ministers that included the former Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, and members of his government that had been defeated at elections in April. He emphasised that he was taking action 'in the national interest' in order to 'prevent further disturbance and bloodshed' after 'monitoring events of the past few weeks'.<sup>21</sup> He called out the 5000-strong Fijian reserve forces to report for duty.

The coup was the culmination of many years of growing tension between Fijians and Indian immigrants.<sup>22</sup> During the colonial period, the British had sponsored the migration to Fiji of large numbers of Indian workers and their families to perform the hard manual labour required in the sugar cane fields. These Indian labourers settled in the country, raised families and within a couple of generations were integrated into most areas of the economy as well as into society. This migration progressively altered the demographic balance in Fiji and enhanced Fiji's economic performance. By the mid-1980s, Indians slightly outnumbered Fijians, precipitating concern among many members of the Fijian population about their political and economic future in their own country.<sup>23</sup>

In the mid-1980s, the Leader of the Opposition party, Dr Timoci Bavadra, a Fijian, built a political coalition from a range of so-called 'left' and 'centre' groups of Indians and Fijians. He mobilised this coalition to win a four-seat majority at the elections in April 1987. Bavadra's Cabinet was comprised of ministers from the Fijian and Indian communities, but 19 of his government's 28 members were Indians. His coalition replaced the long-serving conservative government of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (comprised mostly of Fijian representatives from leading families) that had been in power for 17 years since Fiji's independence in 1970. The election of the Bavadra Government would be the first test of the depth and

resilience of Fiji's democracy as well as the resolve of the Australian and New Zealand Governments to intervene in the region when democracy was threatened by traditional elites who assumed that power would always belong to them.

Although the probability of a change of government had been recognised for some time, the result came as a surprise and shock to many, especially members of the hardline Fijian nationalist 'Taukei' Movement. They began a series of demonstrations and activities designed to disrupt and put pressure on the new government.<sup>24</sup> This led to a rising sense of tension and uncertainty in the country, as well as considerable emotive speculation that there would be a civil war. These were the disturbances and bloodshed that Rabuka alluded to in his justification of the coup in his radio broadcast to the nation on 14 May 1987.

The RFMF was a bastion of Fijian interests and possibly their final protection if they were threatened by the Indian majority. The RFMF was an institution that emanated from a long martial history. The role of Fijian males was to be warriors. The British drew on this warrior culture during the Second World War to recruit large numbers of Fijian males into the British armed forces.<sup>25</sup> Fijian men found military service lucrative and amenable. Upon war's end, a significant number enlisted in both the British Army and the post-independence RFMF. While the Fijian police was comprised of many Indians and lightly armed, the RFMF was predominantly comprised of Fijians and was heavily armed.<sup>26</sup>

With an increase of UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East after the war in 1973, successive Fijian Governments offered RFMF units for overseas service. This had the advantages of reducing the cost of the RFMF, providing employment for hundreds of Fijian men and earning additional foreign exchange. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the RFMF had two 600-strong infantry battalions permanently deployed on UN missions in the Sinai and southern Lebanon.

By the mid-1980s a significant proportion of the Fijian male population had served as short service enlistees or Reservists with the RFMF. This service had given them operational experience with the United Nations in the conduct of low-intensity operations in the midst of a civilian population. Overseas deployments extended the political awareness of many past and present officers and men. They had observed first hand the role of the Israeli Defence Force in maintaining law and order. Thus, by the mid-1980s the RFMF was quite competent and confident in the conduct of internal security operations. After several tours of duty with the United Nations, many men had returned to civilian employment, and family and village life. Many joined (or were sympathetic to) the Taukei Movement as economic, social and political tensions between Fijians and Indians increased during the 1980s.

In the uncertain and increasingly violent climate after the election of the Bavadra Government, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, the third most senior officer in the RFME, was able to draw on nationalistic and ethnic sentiments among members of the RFMF and their opposition to the ascendancy of Indian interests in the Fijian economy and society. The disruptive protests by the Taukei Movement gave him reason to suspend civilian government in the interests of public safety. He spoke of an assassination plot against Indian Cabinet Ministers by anti-government elements.<sup>27</sup> He had achieved surprise and was now able to draw on Fijian loyalties to secure support from members of the police force and government departments to acquiesce to his demands for a new constitution and form of governance that would favour Fijian interests.

On 15 May 1987 Rabuka had warned the local media not to stir up opposition to the coup.<sup>28</sup> He ordered a series of raids on newspaper offices and radio studios after they had expressed concern about the coup's legitimacy and speculated on a range of responses. During the night of 15 May, armed troops closed Fiji's two newspapers (the *Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*) and its radio station. Groups of troops also confronted Australian and other Western journalists and warned them that, if they wrote or broadcast any more negative stories about the coup, they would be arrested and expelled from Fiji. Soldiers arrested Hugh Rimington, a journalist working for Australia's Macquarie Network, presumably for taking umbrage.<sup>29</sup> By this time, Western and regional condemnation of the coup was uniform. The United States and Britain joined Australia, New Zealand and regional countries such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, as well as other Commonwealth nations in calling for the restoration of democratic governance.<sup>30</sup> However, these governments were silent, ruled out or equivocated about military intervention to restore the Bavadra Government. The editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* concluded that, in absence of a firm commitment for regional military intervention, 'the Fijian coup now seems irreversible' and, while acknowledging that Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and David Lange had not ruled out military action if requested, the only defensible pretext for Australia and New Zealand projecting military force into Fiji would be humanitarian—'a total breakdown of law and order'.<sup>31</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kim C. Beazley, *Terms of Reference, Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, 13 February 1985, in Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, Report to the Minister for Defence by Mr Paul Dibb, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1986, p. xv. See also Paul Dibb, Covering letter to Defence Minister K.C. Beazley, March 1986, in Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. i.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, Report to the Minister for Defence by Mr Paul Dibb, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 149 and p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 44 and p. 51.

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- <sup>5</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, parts 3–6 and 7–8, and parts 1 and 2 and pp. 113 and 149.
- <sup>6</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 43.
- <sup>7</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987.
- <sup>8</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, pp. 31–32. **posture**: a combination of capability and intent. Australian Defence Force Publication, 101, glossary, 1994.
- <sup>9</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, preface, p. vii, and p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, p. vii. According to *The Defence of Australia 1987*, the area of direct military interest included Australia, its territories and proximate ocean areas, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and other nearby countries in the southwest Pacific. It stretches over 7000 kilometres from the Cocos Islands to New Zealand and the islands of the southwest Pacific and 5000 kilometres south to 'the Southern Ocean'. (p. 2.)
- <sup>11</sup> Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, An Introduction by the Minister for Defence, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987, p. 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 99.
- <sup>13</sup> Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, p. 99.
- <sup>14</sup> General Sir Phillip Bennett, CDF Directive 5/87, 12 March 1987. Described by David Horner in *Making of the Australian Defence Force*, pp. 62–63.
- <sup>15</sup> The Service chiefs could command single Service operations, though the likelihood of significant projections of force not involving at least two Services was remote, unless the means for deployment and sustainment of land force elements were contracted to commercial agencies, or allies provided strategic lift and means for sustainment. Larger projections would also require the application of firepower and deterrent presence of all three Services.
- <sup>16</sup> A secessionist Francophile rebellion broke out on the island of Espiritu Santo on 28 May 1980, two months before the New Hebrides was to be granted independence from Britain and France on 30 July. The newly-elected Prime Minister, Father Walter Hadye Lini, called on members of the South Pacific Forum to quell the rebellion and declared a state of emergency. With independence still two months away, France put 100 paratroopers on standby in New Caledonia while Britain had 200 Royal Marines already located at Port Vila. In the end military action to quell the rebellion was taken by force elements from the PNG Defence Force, facilitated by Australian military logistics support and coordination. For a comprehensive account, see Matthew Gubb, *Vanuatu's 1980 Santo Rebellion—International Responses to a Microstate Security*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, no. 107, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1994.
- <sup>17</sup> Patrick Walters, Mary Louise O'Callaghan and Ross Dunn, 'Former Fiji PM in Coup Cabinet', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Walters, O'Callaghan and Dunn, 'Former Fiji PM in Coup Cabinet', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 8.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Walters, O'Callaghan and Dunn, 'Former Fiji PM in Coup Cabinet', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>20</sup> Staff correspondents in Suva, 'Ratu Kamisese Mara involved in Coup', *The Australian*, 16 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Staff correspondents in Suva, 'Ratu Kamisese Mara involved in Coup', *Australian*, 16 May 1987, p. 4. Also Rex Gardiner, publisher of *Fiji Times*, report of an interview with Lieutenant Colonel Rabuka, *Australian*, 15 May 1987, p. 4.
- <sup>22</sup> See (ed.) Sahendra Prasad, *Coup and Crisis: Fiji—A Year Later*, Arena Publications, Sydney, 1988, for a description of the causes and consequences of the coup.
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Hastings, 'Uneasy Past, Uncertain Future', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 8. Hastings quoted population figures of 347 000 Indians and 333 000 Fijians.
- <sup>24</sup> On 24 April 1987 the Taukei Movement organised a demonstration that resulted in the RFMF being placed on full alert with a riot squad on standby. P. Clements, 'Coups and the Fiji Military', *Peacekeeping & International Relations*, vol. 30, issue 1–3, January–March 2001, p. 5.
- <sup>25</sup> See R. Howlett, *The History of the Fiji Military Forces 1939–45*, Government Printer, Suva, 1948.
- <sup>26</sup> Hastings, 'Uneasy Past, Uncertain Future', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> See (ed.) Prasad, *Coup & Crisis: Fiji—A Year Later*, p. 220–24; and Kenneth Bain, *Treason at 10: Fiji at the crossroads*, Hodder & Stoughton, Melbourne, 1989, p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Rex Gardiner, publisher of *Fiji Times*, report of an interview with Lieutenant Colonel Rabuka, 15 May 1987, *Australian*, 15 May 1987, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Walters and Mary Louise O'Callaghan, 'Rabuka: Fijians must rule the rest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1987, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Walters and O'Callaghan, 'Rabuka: Fijians must rule the rest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1987, p. 1. See also James Oram and Brian Woodley, 'Fijian Soldiers stop our writers; papers closed', *Weekend Australian*, 16–17 May 1987, p. 5; and Peter Hastings, 'Paias Wingti attacks Fiji coup', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Editorial, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1987, p. 28.