

Chapter 5

Lessons and Observations

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) strategic level of command was eager to learn from Operation *Morris Dance*. It was a rare opportunity for the ADF to practise offshore joint force projection. Air Vice Marshal Peter Scully had acted quickly. On 3 June 1987 he wrote to the Service chiefs and environmental commanders stating that 'we need to analyse the potential strengths and weaknesses that became obvious throughout the operation'. He requested them to submit reports 'to provide differing perspectives of ADF actions in relation to Operation "MORRISDANCE". ... The reports are to highlight observed strengths and weaknesses and contain recommendations for improvements in planning processes, liaison, command arrangements and control measures within the ADF.'¹

The Deputy Exercise Director, Joint Exercise Planning Staff, who had been informed by reports from Headquarters Australian Defence Force (HQ ADF) staff, the three Services and the three environmental commanders, submitted a consolidated report on Operation *Morris Dance* four months later in October 1987.² He focused on the strategic level of command.³ As a consequence, his report would not inform Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) about the difficulties encountered by those working at the tactical level. Rather, the report evaluated higher level processes of planning, command, control, communications and administration.

The Post Operation Report concluded that strategic and operational level planning processes had neither complied with doctrine nor worked well. The interaction between HQ ADF and the three Service headquarters in Canberra demonstrated that General Sir Phillip Bennett's recent directives had not yet streamlined ADF joint planning process. This was unsurprising considering that extant processes had been untested for over 20 years, and that the new arrangements (only announced two months before) had been neither rehearsed nor practised. The report recommended that HQ ADF should issue 'a Planning or Initiating Directive' to advise subordinate headquarters quickly and comprehensively on what planning data was needed to develop military response options for the government.⁴

While the author of the report recognised correctly that 'the government may not make decisions on military options in the timeframe desired by HQ ADF' and that 'when a government decision is made, a rapid response by the ADF will be expected', he did not highlight that political leaders imposed strict

secrecy during the Fiji crisis that prohibited the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) issuing planning directives or warning orders, and would most likely do the same during future crises.⁵ The lesson was not that the CDF should issue 'Planning Directives' or 'Warning Orders' as early as possible—this was well understood by military officers—but that it was unlikely that he would warn the ADF until the government was prepared to advise the public about its military intentions. As Operation *Morris Dance* demonstrated, after the Prime Minister and Cabinet made their decision to project force, they expected the ADF to do so quickly.

The author of this report assessed that assignment of force elements from the Service chiefs to the CDF and environmental commanders was 'a cumbersome process. ... The [Bennett] directives do not make clear whether this assignment is to be through the Service Chiefs of Staff or direct.'⁶ He went on to observe that 'the "either/or" command arrangements' that envisaged the Maritime Commander or the Air Commander commanding Operation *Morris Dance*, depending on whether the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), General Peter Gratton, ordered an air or sea evacuation, had

resulted in a deal of 'ad hoc' co-ordination at lower levels, especially in the provision of administrative support, and contributed to the general comment of 'interference' and overlaps in actions taken and direction given by HQ ADF and Service Offices [in Canberra] ... the whole process was unnecessarily complicated.⁷

There was room for improvement for liaison between participating government departments and the ADF. Remarkably, HQ ADF quickly established liaison with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), but included neither the office of the Minister for Defence nor the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.⁸ The passage of classified information was impeded by a lack of secure telephone and facsimile links between departments, ministerial offices and HQ ADF. There was also no independent military radio communication between Australia and its High Commission in Fiji or between the ADF liaison officer on Norfolk Island, Major Vince Walsh, back to Australia or to deploying ships and aircraft.⁹

Command and control was further complicated because each Service chief of staff had responsibilities to provide logistic support through environmental commanders to deployed force elements.¹⁰ Scully did not include representatives from Joint Logistics Branch, the Surgeon General and Financial Management Branch in initial planning. There was no 'integrated joint logistic planning and coordination'.¹¹ There was no joint logistic desk officer on duty in the control centre at HQ ADF, and there were no air supply arrangements made for spare parts or mail.¹²

The final major concern was arrangements for intelligence support. Major Mike Dennis, who was assigned to Major Gary Stone as a Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) liaison officer, did not have independent secure communications back to Australia or to Fiji. Understandably, intelligence agencies were not used to providing analytical and predictive support for offshore evacuation operations. For Operation *Morris Dance*, there might have been violent interference from hostile groups within the RFMF and nationalistic Fijian organisations; yet Australian intelligence services did not appear to be in a position to identify and monitor this threat. Certainly, Stone was not included as a recipient of intelligence of this kind and assumed, possibly incorrectly, that there was none.¹³ The author of the post-operations report offered:

Experience from Operation MORRISDANCE confirmed the requirement to establish the intelligence system at the outset of any operation, possibly even before the involvement of the ADF has been confirmed and before command and control arrangements have been settled. ... There are still grey areas in the practical coordination of intelligence requirements, management of assets and division of responsibilities between the strategic and operational intelligence agencies.¹⁴

Under the heading 'Intelligence' in his tactical level report, Lieutenant Colonel John P. Salter (Stone's commanding officer) had written that, 'in the event of a requirement to deploy ashore', Stone would have appreciated information from Special Forces, who might have deployed ahead of them, as well as information on New Zealand intentions in order to avoid 'considerable confusion'.¹⁵ The Maritime Headquarters report highlighted the need to know the intentions of other interested countries and, by implication, their intelligence operations as well as their evacuation plans.¹⁶ Interestingly, JIO denied access to intelligence staff from the Service officers to briefings on Operation *Morris Dance*—an unhelpful demarcation according to the Army Office report.¹⁷

Concerns about the problems encountered at the tactical level with coordination, joint procedures for deployment and logistic support appeared to be confined to lower levels of command. Colonel Ian Ahearn, Colonel (Plans) at Land Headquarters, assessed that the ADF lacked the 'capability at the operational level to coordinate the operational deployment of a small joint force'.¹⁸ Walsh and Stone echoed this assessment in their reports.¹⁹ Ahearn's colleague at Land Headquarters, Colonel John Bertram, Colonel (Administration), added that, despite orders from Land Headquarters earlier in 1987:

3rd Brigade had, and still has, shortfalls in their maintenance stocks and there were delivery times of between 45 days and 4 months for demands for supply. ... This [situation] tends to highlight a major concern with the AJSP (Army Joint Support Plan) for PLAN BENEFACTOR—[the plan

that specified arrangements for rapid deployment and sustainment of the ODF [Operational Deployment Force].²⁰

Gration responded to the difficulties identified during Operation *Morris Dance* by modifying ADF command and control. In future, he would exercise command through his HQ ADF staff directly to a joint force commander for operations and not involve the Service chiefs except in an advisory capacity.²¹ This change had the potential to simplify processes in Canberra and streamline the transfer of strategic guidance to the operational and tactical levels of command.

Observations

The conduct of Operation *Morris Dance* confirmed that the Australian Government, in general, and the Defence Department in particular, still had some way to go to synchronise joint force projection to promote regional stability and security in a time of crisis. The first challenge was to contemplate military action in secret, yet also allow the tactical level of command to take prudent preparatory action. The second was to streamline government and ADF crisis machinery in areas, such as inter-departmental liaison and consultation, planning, force assignment and communication of strategic intent. The third was to specify command and joint logistics support arrangements early and include logisticians in initial planning. The fourth was to anticipate contingencies with relevant training and acquisition of specialist equipment, including secure communications equipment, and to keep quantities on hand for short notice deployments. The fifth was to specify intelligence arrangements early enough to facilitate early warning, force protection and timely responses to threats. The sixth, and by no means the least challenge, was to get the operational and tactical levels of command from the three Services working together more effectively and practising rapid deployment of land force elements by air and sea.

One of the features of Operation *Morris Dance* was the different perceptions and attitudes of the strategic and tactical levels of command. Gration had a first hand understanding of the Australian Government's intent while he advised political leaders and senior departmental officials on military response options. He also had the benefit of JIO and DFAT assessments of the situation in Fiji as well as information broadcast by the media. He based his assessment of the dangers that lay ahead in Fiji on these inputs and sought to calibrate Australia's initial military response carefully to accommodate political sensitivities in Australia and in Fiji, as well as more generally in the South Pacific. Prime Minister Bob Hawke had to decide on the blend of military and political imperatives, while Gration managed the risks and delivered Hawke's specified strategic effects.

Salter and Stone based their assessments of the dangers that lay ahead in Fiji on media reports and their preference to be prepared for worse case scenarios. They found it difficult to accept Gration's risk management of Operation *Morris Dance* for several reasons. The first was that they felt that they could be trusted to keep secrets and to make prudent preparations without public exposure.²² The second was that staff at Army Office, Land Headquarters and HQ 3rd Brigade—the operational level of command—interpreted Gration's strategic intent and complicated what he intended to be a simple contingency deployment. Orders issued to Salter and Stone via the operational level of command assumed that an evacuation would have to be commanded on the ground by an army commander and his headquarters rather than by a naval officer aboard a ship. Yet Gration's intention was the opposite. He envisaged army personnel acting as evacuation marshals in conformity to a naval plan that would be worked out in consultation with Stone at sea on the way to Fiji—a process reminiscent of the successful deployment of the Australian Navy and Military Expeditionary Force (AN and MEF) to the southwest Pacific to capture German military radio stations and Rabaul in 1914. The third reason was that Salter and Stone wished to prepare, deploy and operate as they and their men had been organised and trained. Downsizing and leaving their machine guns and grenade launchers behind is an anathema to infantrymen, who prefer to operate with familiar and trusted teams and individuals around them, and weapons at their disposal to both defend themselves and win military contests.

Salter and Stone relied on media reports in the absence of intelligence reports. Arguably, they should have been given the same intelligence as Gration and members of COSC to balance what they were seeing broadcast in the electronic media and reading in the print media. It was useful to view and read first-hand reports from journalists close to the action, but journalists had a tendency to emphasise the more dramatic elements of what they were observing so as to engage their audiences and readers. Salter and Stone would have benefited from more objective, analytical and predictive information from the Australian High Commission in Fiji and any other sources that were informing COSC. In 1987 there appeared to be no intent, mechanisms or facilities in the ADF for the tactical of command in Townsville or elsewhere to receive highly-classified intelligence or copies of diplomatic cables in a timely way.

Gration's assessment of how the situation in Fiji would play out was vindicated by events. From a strategic perspective, he had delivered a short-notice maritime evacuation option close to Fiji for the government just in case events had not unfolded as they did. From an operational and tactical perspective, there had been too many risks. The processes and procedures for regional force projection were understandably rusty after a 15-year pause in offshore operations since the end of Australia's military participation in the

Vietnam War in 1972. However, there were systemic weaknesses in all of the enabling functions of force projection that increased risks unnecessarily.

Conclusion

The ADF was still evolving into a joint defence force in the late 1980s. Operation *Morris Dance* was a short notice deployment in response to an unexpected and volatile political situation. None of the Services had rehearsed jointly for political emergencies and consequent evacuation operations in the near region. This small-scale projection was a valuable 'wake up call'. Operation *Morris Dance* confirmed historical precedents that Australian Governments would expect the ADF to project military force offshore at short notice in an emergency.

Political volatility in the South Pacific suggested that there would be a need for more carefully calibrated regional projections of Australian military force in the future. Matthew Gubb's summary is apt:

A final point well illustrated by the Vanuatu case [Espiritu Santo Rebellion in 1980] is the ultimate reliance of beleaguered microstates on rapid and decisive military assistance from one or two capable friends, rather than multilateral aid. The ease and speed with which unlawful elements can overwhelm a microstate government means that if external assistance is to be provided at all, then, as a rule, it must be provided extremely rapidly.²³

ENDNOTES

¹ Air Vice Marshal Peter J. Scully, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, ACOPS BS2487/1987, 3 June 1987, 87-22646, Defence Archives, Queanbeyan.

² Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', 15 December 1987, 87/25649, Defence Archives, Queanbeyan.

³ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 2.

⁴ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 5.

⁵ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 6.

⁶ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 7.

⁷ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 7.

⁸ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 9.

⁹ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 9. Also Annex D to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. D-1.

¹⁰ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 8.

¹¹ Anon, *Operation Morrisdance—Post Action Report*, undated. Attached to Scully, Operational (sic) 'Morrisdance—Post Action Report', p. 12.

¹² Annex C to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. C-4.

- ¹³ Gary J. Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997.
- ¹⁴ Anon, *Operation Morrisedance—Post Action Report*, pp. 13–14.
- ¹⁵ John P. Salter, '1 RAR Post Action Report—Operation MORRIS DANCE', 1 RAR 611-10-1 (2), 24 July 1987, p. 15. Copy included in Colonel R.J. Breen, *Compendium of Operational Lessons from Africa and the Arch of instability 1987-2000*, Land Headquarters, February 2004.
- ¹⁶ Anon, *Operation Morrisedance—Post Action Report*. Annex C to *Morrisedance Post Action Report*, p. C-3.
- ¹⁷ Anon, *Operation Morrisedance—Post Action Report*. Annex C to *Morrisedance Post Action Report*, p. C-7.
- ¹⁸ Colonel Ian F. Ahearn, Colonel (Plans), Field Force Command, Minute to Chief of Staff, Brigadier Mick J. Harris, 2 October 1987, 291-K1-11, NAA: Sydney.
- ¹⁹ Major Vince Walsh, LAND COMD LO—NORFOLK ISLAND Minute 291/87, R553/1/1, 28 May 1987, 291-K1-11, NAA: Sydney. Walsh was a liaison officer who witnessed transshipment of personnel, vehicles and stores from air force C-130 *Hercules* transport aircraft to navy ships moored at Norfolk Island during the deployment phase of Operation *Morris Dance*. Also Gary J. Stone, Interview with author, 17 May 1997; and Stone, OP MORRIS DANCE Commander's diary, 21 May–7 June 1987. Copy held by author.
- ²⁰ *Plan Benefactor* was a contingency plan for short notice deployment of 3rd Brigade in emergency situations. Colonel John F. Bertram, 'Lessons from OP 'MORRISDANCE'', Minute COL (ADMIN) 5/87, 2 June 1987, 291-K1-11, NAA: Sydney.
- ²¹ General Peter C. Gratton in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- ²² Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997.
- ²³ Matthew Gubb, *Vanuatu's 1980 Santo Rebellion—International Response to a Microstate Security*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, no. 107, Strategic Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1994, p. 77.