

Chapter 8

Search for Joint Command and Control

In the late 1980s General Peter Gration and then Brigadier John Baker had both shared a vision of a new command appointment and a new joint headquarters that would command Australian Defence Force (ADF) operations.¹ This commander and his headquarters would take over after the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) and his staff had translated government guidance into planning directives. The first moves began in March 1988 when Defence Minister Kim Beazley approved the establishment of Northern Command (NORCOM) with its headquarters in Darwin. The new command was subordinate to the Land Commander in Sydney. Senior maritime and air force officers in the Northern Territory supported Commander NORCOM (COMNORCOM) as component commanders. His role was to plan and conduct surveillance operations with assigned forces across northern Australia and the northern approaches to the mainland—Australia’s geographical frontline.² Accordingly, COMNORCOM, a one-star appointment, would coordinate surveillance and then orchestrate initial responses to incursions by hostile forces awaiting arrival of a senior joint commander, his headquarters and follow-on forces—a national projection of military force from the south and east to the northwest.

By 1996, as the new CDF, Baker was determined to complete the reorganisation of ADF command and control arrangements, including synchronising joint intelligence, logistics and movements in support of operations.³ Co-location of existing environmental headquarters would be insufficient to achieve unity of command.⁴ He wanted a new co-located joint force headquarters separated geographically from Canberra.⁵ In March 1996, he directed the Maritime Commander, Rear Admiral Chris Oxenbould, to also act as Commander Australian Theatre (Interim) and to raise Headquarters Australian Theatre (HQ AST) at Potts Point in Sydney. He also directed Oxenbould to raise the Australian Theatre Joint Intelligence Centre (ASTJIC) and gave him command of 1 Joint Movements Group (1 JMOVGP).⁶

The raising of HQ AST involved a number of concurrent processes. The first process was the preparation and distribution of a series of papers seeking consensus from the environmental commanders and the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) on the form and functions of what would become known as the theatre level of command. The second was a build-up of staff numbers for HQ AST from the three Services in a refurbished building adjacent to Maritime Headquarters at Potts Point in Sydney. The third was the planning and conduct of the *Crocodile* series of exercises (akin to the *Kangaroo* series of exercises during the 1970s and

1980s) to test these evolving joint command arrangements. The fourth was a search for a site to co-locate environmental and component commanders and sufficient staff to plan and conduct campaigns, operations and prescribed activities.

For the purposes of this monograph, the establishment of HQ AST is only described from the perspective of its impact on Australian military force projection; that is, 'Did it enhance or detract?' and, more specifically, what was the impact of HQ AST on the next regional force projection to Bougainville in 1997? The COMAST and his headquarters faced challenges that obligated astute anticipation, efficient planning and dissemination of guidance, orders and instructions, as well as timely reconnaissance and deployment. The trend since Operation *Morris Dance* had been for the government and the strategic level of command in Canberra to insist on secrecy and to forbid contingency planning at lower levels of command until a few weeks before deployment. Consequently, there was less time for preparation and reconnaissance. Intelligence support also needed attention. Joint logistic support and the air force air resupply chain—major risk factors of earlier operations in the 1990s—needed to be more responsive to deployed forces.⁷ Would COMAST and HQ AST mitigate or increase risk?

There was a contest of ideas in 1996. Oxenbould, assisted by Colonel Greg McDowall, developed papers describing the structure of HQ AST and sought to define responsibilities, roles and tasks, as well as relationships, between nine two-star officers and their headquarters as well as COMNORCOM in Darwin and commander of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (COMD DJFHQ) in Brisbane, who would be involved in ADF operations operationally or logistically. Oxenbould and McDowall proposed two options in their first paper in May 1996.⁸ The first was for COMAST and HQ AST to coordinate the efforts of each component in a collegial way, and for environmental commanders to be responsible for assigned operations 'in their own right'.⁹ The second was for each component to be responsible for assigned operations on behalf of COMAST as his environmental deputy commanders.¹⁰ The two options represented similar functional models, but very different staff relationships. The collegial approach suited peacetime and did not change relationships or staff focus on service training and sustainment responsibilities. The integrated option offered 'greater unity of command in war' and would change the staff focus to campaigns and operations as well as peacetime training and sustainment.¹¹

Oxenbould distributed a draft organisation for HQ AST to the environmental commanders on 18 December 1996 in preparation for submission to COSC on 26 February 1997.¹² He sought comment by 27 January. This draft described the organisation for HQ AST that reflected Option 1, confirming that, for the time being, joint command and control at the operational level would depend on

cooperative rather than command relationships—an evolutionary not revolutionary approach.¹³ While COMAST commanded the environmental commanders for operations on paper, his chief of staff only coordinated staff effort from each component through his small joint administrative, planning, intelligence and operations cells and a modest joint command centre.

The challenge for the Joint Administrative Cell at HQ AST, under these cooperative arrangements, was substantial. An officer of colonel equivalent rank was responsible for developing policy and directing planning for joint logistic support to operations, that also included ‘drawing extensively’ on 1 JMOVGP for movements and each environmental headquarters for personnel administration.¹⁴ This officer and a handful of staff would also be expected to ‘direct and control, within the authority delegated by the joint commander, logistic, personnel, health and other administrative support for the joint campaign and coordinate component and subordinate administrative support’, and movements.¹⁵ Thus, he or she would interact with seasoned chiefs of staff and equivalent ranks on the staffs of three component commanders in Sydney, three Service headquarters in Canberra and three headquarters of each of the logistic commanders of each Service as well as NORCOM and DJFHQ.

The challenges for the officer of colonel equivalent rank commanding ASTJIC were also substantial. He or she had to prepare joint intelligence estimates and plans, and coordinate the collection, processing and dissemination of intelligence for the planning and conduct of joint campaigns as well as higher-level intelligence support for operations. This officer and a small staff would be interacting with 15 national and three international agencies as well as intelligence staffs at three environmental headquarters and HQ Special Forces, NORCOM and DJFHQ.¹⁶

More broadly, the Services favoured a ‘top down’ approach to finding staff for this headquarters that would see HQ AST assuming responsibilities and taking staff from Baker’s newly-reorganised Australian Defence Headquarters (ADHQ) rather than taking a ‘bottom up’ approach that focused on HQ AST assuming responsibilities from the environmental headquarters and taking staff from them.¹⁷ It was on this principle that a contest of ideas ensued that appeared to be based on each Service chief and environmental commander wanting someone else to assign staff positions to HQ AST. Baker knew of these sensitivities.¹⁸ He had already directed Oxenbould to produce a paper that devolved control of ADF operations from ADHQ to HQ AST, which would involve no net increase in staff but would transfer 30 per cent of staff positions from ADHQ to HQ AST.¹⁹ This approach added Air Vice Marshal Brian Weston, his senior operations officer, to the debate to protect staff numbers.

Referring to CDF guidance, Oxenbould argued that ADHQ would ‘direct’ operations and HQ AST would ‘control’ them.²⁰ He recommended transferring

a number of staff from ADHQ to HQ AST based on his understanding of what this meant. He envisaged COMAST establishing a strong relationship with the US Commander in Chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), located in Hawaii. In his reply to Oxenbould, Weston disagreed with Oxenbould's interpretation of Baker's guidance and proposed minimal staff transfers and retention of the relationship between the CDF and ADHQ, and CINCPAC and Headquarters Pacific Command (PACOM), in Hawaii.²¹ He opined that COMAST and HQ AST would not develop political/military relationships with allies in the Australian theatre in general, or become involved in the US–Australian bilateral military relationship in particular.²² Weston argued that COMAST was a theatre/operational commander, not a theatre/strategic commander.²³

Oxenbould wrote back to Weston on 21 November 1996, as his tenure as both Maritime Commander and COMAST drew to an end, complaining that he could not believe that the 'CDF would accept such an expensive proposal in duplication of effort, and such a diminished role for HQ AST in the planning and conduct of campaigns'.²⁴

Oxenbould's counter-arguments to Weston reveal several dilemmas. He pointed out that CINCPAC was a theatre/strategic commander who had strategic, operational and tactical level responsibilities, but that US armed forces doctrine did not recognise a theatre/strategic level of war. Consequently, Oxenbould argued that CINCPAC and his staff should deal with the CDF and ADHQ for strategic matters and COMAST and HQ AST for theatre matters, 'just as the CDF deals with both CINCPAC and the Pentagon'.²⁵ Weston's argument was that the US National Command Authority (NCA), comprising the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commanded each geographic Commander in Chief (CINC). Therefore, CINCPAC was responsible for both shaping the political and military environment of US national interests in the Pacific area and interacting with regional allies for operations. He was also responsible to the NCA for planning and conducting campaigns and operations in his own right. Thus, CINCPAC and his staff dealt with the CDF and ACOPS satisfactorily at the strategic level, and he and his component commanders and staff also dealt harmoniously at operational and tactical levels with Australian forces from the three Services and Special Forces. The question unanswered by Weston was, 'Why did CINCPAC need to deal with COMAST at all, except to recognise him as a standing joint force commander?'

Baker appeared to be mirroring the US CINC system by creating COMAST, but then not allowing COMAST the full powers of a US CINC. As a superpower with global concerns, the United States created several permanent theatre/strategic commanders, but there was no separation of strategic and theatre levels of command within an American theatre. Why then did a middle power like Australia need to add a theatre level of command within its one Australian

theatre? In effect, Baker wanted to create an Australian CINC, but then not devolve responsibilities for him to be an Australian equivalent to CINCPAC. A pertinent question was, 'Why did Australia need both a CDF and a separate CINC equivalent?' It may have been simpler to have a CDF and a chief of joint operations within ADHQ reporting to him.

Putting aside these unanswered questions, the more important issue for the ADF was how to synchronise nine two-star officers and their headquarters, as well as a regional commander in Darwin (COMNORCOM) and the commander of a deployable headquarters in Brisbane (COMD DJFHQ) to execute the functions of force projection effectively and efficiently. A permanent joint force headquarters was required. Arguably, if the US CINC model was applied and Weston's arguments supported, the CDF and ADHQ already constituted a CINC for the Australian theatre and only needed to incorporate environmental component commanders and their staff to operate like a CINC. Though COMAST was intended to be an Australian equivalent of a US CINC, he was not given authority over the environmental commanders and their staffs or over the Service logistic commanders to synchronise Australia's military force projection. For his part, Major General Des Mueller, the first Commander Support Command–Australia (COMSPTAS), was given command of each Service logistic support commander, but depended on cooperative arrangements between his staff groups and component headquarters to get things done.²⁶ The question was whether these arrangements gave sufficient control to synchronise logistics for ADF operations.

Oxenbould also used another argument that sounded fine in theory, but was unlikely to work based on recent operational experience. He wrote:

In reality, the transition from strategic to operational planning must be a gradual one rather than a clean break, but it is essential that the operational level interaction be established early and that it develops primacy as planning proceeds and the focus moves from strategic to operational decision making.²⁷

Here was another dilemma. Since Operation *Morris Dance*, the strategic level of command had never involved subordinate headquarters in early contingency planning. There had been no time for a gradual transition from strategic to operational planning processes for Operation *Lagoon*. Planning processes had to be fast and concurrent—not gradual and sequential. Governments were not giving the ADF time to plan down through each level of command under hierarchical and sequential arrangements because of a political and diplomatic need for secrecy. Australian force projection only worked well when there was plenty of preparation time.

There was also another dilemma. The strategic level was unlikely to delegate decision-making to lower levels of command. International and national media scrutiny and political sensitivity to exposure of tactical errors and incidents to a worldwide audience meant that the strategic level on behalf of political leaders remained intimately interested in both operational level and tactical level decision-making and outcomes. Politicians were unlikely to wait patiently for the military chain of command to process information from the tactical level through to the strategic level via an operational level of command when the Australian public was receiving instantaneous information via television. Nor were they likely to leave it to the military chain of command to contemplate problems through several layers of command and to come up with courses of action, when the next newspaper or television deadline obligated the Australian Government to respond to a tactical incident within hours.

Weston replied to Oxenbould on 18 December 1996, the same day that Oxenbould distributed his pre-Christmas paper on the organisation and tasks of HQ AST.²⁸ Weston chose not to address substantive issues, but to emphasise an evolutionary approach. He pointed out that HQ AST would interact with allies in the Pacific theatre by managing the combined exercise program and other activities.²⁹ He also joined Oxenbould in the view that, when the government decided to take military action, strategic and operational decision-making would be sequential and would devolve naturally from the strategic level to the operational level of command, giving COMAST freedom to plan and conduct campaigns and operations.³⁰ Neither recognised that recent operational experience and political insistence on secrecy, as well as the imperative for rapid politico-strategic responses to tactical level incidents, rendered this orderly model of contingency planning, force preparation and devolved decision-making obsolete.

From 31 January 1997, the first COMAST, Major General Jim Connolly, though he was of the same rank, commanded the environmental commanders for operations. His staff operated with staffs at Maritime, Land and Air Headquarters on a collegial basis for the planning and conduct of campaigns and operations. On 14 July 1997, he submitted an agendum paper to COSC, 'The Permanent Form and Function of HQ AST'.³¹ Connolly noted that on 26 February COSC had prescribed a 30 per cent cut in the staff numbers proposed by Oxenbould in his pre-Christmas paper. He also noted that on 1 May 1997 the Vice Chief of the Defence Force (VCDF), Vice Admiral Chris Barrie, had imposed an overall ceiling of 800 staff on HQ AST, DJFHQ and NORCOM, and that HQ AST should be 'structured for war but adapted for peace', in accordance with the Government's Defence Reform Program.³²

Connolly was not tempted by either the cut in staff numbers or the invitation to structure for war to propose a more integrated model for HQ AST. His paper

confirmed that cooperative relations would apply between his staff branches and component staffs, and that ASTJIC, Joint Administrative Branch and 1 JMOVGP would coordinate intelligence, logistic support and movements for joint operations respectively.³³ While Connolly anticipated that the forthcoming *Crocodile* series of exercises would validate these arrangements, real-time events were soon to thoroughly test the form and function of his headquarters.

ENDNOTES

¹ General Peter C. Gratton in interview with author, 19 August 2005; General John S. Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005; and Department of Defence, 'Report on the Study into ADF Command Arrangements', Headquarters Australian Defence Force, Canberra, 1988, (prepared by Brigadier John S. Baker for the Chief of the Defence Force), 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

² Gratton in interview with author, 19 August 2005; and Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005.

³ This process began in February 1995 when a small planning staff distributed draft statements of the mission and responsibilities of COMAST to Baker and environmental commanders. HQ AST, 10/1/5, 16 February 1995, HQ AST, Potts Point. In December 1995, Baker distributed instructions specifying his requirements for a single joint operational level commander and a permanent operational level joint headquarters. He also specified that HQ AST would include joint intelligence, logistics and movements staff. General John S. Baker, 'CDF Directive 582/95', 22 December 1995, pp. 1-2, 94 4323, HQ AST, Potts Point.

⁴ Baker, CDF Directive 582/95, p. 1.

⁵ Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005.

⁶ General John S. Baker, 'CDF Directive 13/96', 5 March 1996, 94 4323, HQ AST, Potts Point.

⁷ See Bob Breen, *A Little Bit of Hope, Australian Force—Somalia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998, Chapter 6; and Bob Breen, *Giving Peace a Chance, Operation Lagoon, Bougainville 1994: A Case Study of Military Action and Diplomacy*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, no. 412, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2001, p. 82 and pp. 86–87.

⁸ Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'Structure of Headquarters Australian Theatre', HQ AST 31/96, 623-11-1, 20 May 1996, HQ AST, Potts Point.

⁹ Oxenbould, 'Structure of Headquarters Australian Theatre', HQ AST 31/96, 623-11-1, 20 May 1996, HQ AST, Potts Point, p. 8.

¹⁰ Oxenbould, 'Structure of Headquarters Australian Theatre', HQ AST 31/96, 623-11-1, 20 May 1996, HQ AST, Potts Point, p. 8.

¹¹ Oxenbould, 'Structure of Headquarters Australian Theatre', HQ AST 31/96, 623-11-1, 20 May 1996, HQ AST, Potts Point, p. 12.

¹² Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'ADF Command Arrangements Organisation of Headquarters Australian Theatre', HQ AST 23/96, 18 December 1996, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

¹³ Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'Organisation of Headquarters Australian Theatre', draft dated January 1997, Annexes A and B, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

¹⁴ Oxenbould, 'Organisation of Headquarters Australian Theatre', draft dated January 1997, p. 11.

¹⁵ Oxenbould, 'Organisation of Headquarters Australian Theatre', draft dated January 1997, Annex G, p. 2.

¹⁶ These agencies were the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), the Defence Security Branch (DSB), six Defence Centres and six regional counterintelligence sections in Australia. There were also Defence staffs in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and intelligence staff at US HQ PACOM in Hawaii.

¹⁷ Director Force Structure Planning, 'Brief for VCDF (through ACPSG) Tri-Service Team Review—Proposed Interim HQ AST Organisational Structure', ADHQ, 18 October 1996, Copy less attachments held by author. This brief summarised the concerns of the three Services contained in 'Tri-Service Team Report—Proposed Interim HQ AST Organisational Structure', unreferenced and undated.

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¹⁸ Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005.

¹⁹ Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', HQ AST 167/96, 15 October 1996, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

²⁰ The guidance Oxenbould referred to was, General John S. Baker, 'CDF Directive 13/1996', 5 March 1996, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point. Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'Devolution of Tasks from HQADF Operations Division to HQ AST', 11 October 1996, p. 1, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

²¹ Air Vice Marshal Brian G. Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BR2573/96, 96 4957, 29 October 1996, pp. 1–2, Copy on HQ AST 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

²² Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BR2573/96, 96 4957, 29 October 1996, p. 3 and Annex B.

²³ Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BR2573/96, 96 4957, 29 October 1996, Annex B, p. 4.

²⁴ Rear Admiral Chris J. Oxenbould, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', HQ AST 204/96, p. 1, 21 November 1996, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

²⁵ Oxenbould, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', HQ AST 204/96, p. 2.

²⁶ David Horner, *Making the Australian Defence Force*, The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume V, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 268–74.

²⁷ Horner, *Making the Australian Defence Force*, pp. 268–74.

²⁸ Air Vice Marshal Brian G. Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BC 2842/96, 18 December 1996, 96 4957, HQ AST, Potts Point.

²⁹ Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BC 2842/96, 18 December 1996, 96 4957, HQ AST, Potts Point, pp. 2–3.

³⁰ Weston, 'Devolution of Tasks to HQ AST', ACOPS BC 2842/96, 18 December 1996, 96 4957, HQ AST, Potts Point, p. 2.

³¹ Major General Jim M. Connolly, 'The Permanent Form and Function of HQ AST', HQ AST 430/97, 14 July 1997, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point.

³² Connolly, 'The Permanent Form and Function of HQ AST', HQ AST 430/97, 14 July 1997, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point, pp. 1–2.

³³ Connolly, 'The Permanent Form and Function of HQ AST', HQ AST 430/97, 14 July 1997, 623-11-1, HQ AST, Potts Point, Annexes C and G, and p. 10.