

Chapter 9

Lead Up to Operation *Bel Isi*

On 17 March 1997, Brigadier General Jerry Singarok, Commander of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), revealed publicly that the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Sir Julius Chan, and several members of his Cabinet had arranged for contractors from Sandline International to establish and train a task force that would deploy to Bougainville to kill or capture members of the secessionist leadership group and retake the Panguna copper mine near Arawa. Singarok mounted and conducted Operation *Rousim Quik* to deport members of the Sandline training cadre and to deter incoming aircraft carrying military hardware for the operation.¹ These events constituted a strategic surprise for Australia as well as an intelligence failure.²

The Chan Government cancelled the Sandline contract after Singarok's disclosures. In subsequent elections, Chan lost his seat, and his coalition lost power. Prime Minister Bill Skate formed a new coalition, promising a renewal of negotiations in the hope of ending the Bougainville Crisis, rather than pursuing a military solution. The New Zealand Foreign Minister, Don McKinnon, seized this opportunity to contact Skate and offer mediation. In late March 1997, the New Zealand Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), Lieutenant General Alan Birks, summoned his Assistant Chief of the Defence Force—Operations (ACOPS), Brigadier Roger Mortlock, to a meeting with McKinnon and his senior negotiator, John Hayes, Head South Pacific Branch, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. They told Mortlock that New Zealand was looking to broker dialogue between the PNG Government and secessionist leaders in Bougainville. Initially, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) would transport Bougainvillean delegates to and from Bougainville and host talks among the Bougainvillean factions at a military camp in New Zealand.³

On 2 July 1997, McKinnon announced that talks between Bougainvillean representatives would be convened on the following weekend at the army camp at Burnham. From Hong Kong, the Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer supported the New Zealand initiative as 'a useful development'. He confirmed that Australian Prime Minister John Howard and New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger had been discussing PNG affairs. In short, Australia and New Zealand would be working together.⁴ Like Operation *Lagoon*, Australia's Foreign Minister was giving Defence explicit strategic warning of Australian diplomatic reengagement with finding a solution to the Bougainville Crisis and a possibility of something like an Operation '*Lagoon II*'.

The outcome of the talks at Burnham in July was the Burnham Declaration. All Bougainvillean factions agreed to invite the PNG Government to discuss conditions for a truce as the first step towards declaring a ceasefire. The declaration also foreshadowed the use of 'a neutral Peace Keeping Force' on Bougainville to monitor compliance with the truce and ensure that there were no breaches of any agreements made by the PNG Government and Bougainvillean factions.⁵

The successes of the Burnham talks, the safe return of Bougainvillean delegates, and the release of five PNGDF prisoners by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) as an act of goodwill, demonstrated that cooperation between New Zealand diplomats and the NZDF was working well.⁶ Diplomatic cooperation between Australia and New Zealand was also harmonious. Downer and McKinnon met in New Zealand on 22 August 1997, and the following day released a joint statement emphasising that Australia and New Zealand were united in their desire to assist the new Skate Government to solve the Bougainville Crisis. Downer then flew to Port Moresby to meet with Skate on 25 August, a day before McKinnon was scheduled to meet Skate and then accompany him to Bougainville. The mission of both ministers was to bolster Skate's commitment to a negotiated settlement and to pledge Australian and New Zealand support to assist the peace process and reconstruction in Bougainville.⁷

Use of Warning Time

Downer was also preparing the Australian public for the involvement of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in a neutral peacekeeping force on Bougainville in similar ways to how his predecessor had prepared the Australian public for ADF involvement in Operation *Lagoon* in 1994. The day before Downer and McKinnon released their joint statement, Lindsay Murdoch, the International Affairs correspondent with the *Age*, wrote an 'exclusive' article about ADF contingency plans for providing logistic support to a regional peacekeeping force on Bougainville, once the PNG Government and Bougainvillean leaders agreed to a truce. Quoting a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Murdoch stated that Australia would be prepared to assist with a peacekeeping force if 'there was a genuine peace to keep'.⁸ Australia's role would be to provide transport, communications, and medical services, rather than armed troops that might raise suspicion and hostility among Bougainvillean secessionist leaders, who were still angry about ADF assistance to the PNGDF. A few days after Murdoch's article, an article in the *Weekend Australian* predicted that an Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) peacekeeping force would serve in Bougainville by the end of the year.⁹

By 26 August 1997, Skate had announced his Cabinet's endorsement of the Burnham Declaration as a basis for negotiation for a round of talks between the

PNG Government and Bougainvillean representatives. For his part, Downer pledged over A\$100 million in additional aid to Bougainville over five years, but demurred when asked about Australia sending troops to the island. He affirmed Australian support for New Zealand efforts, suggesting that the ADF would provide only logistic support to a New Zealand-led regional peacekeeping force. In the shorter term, he said that Australian service aircraft would transport Bougainvillean delegates to and from Honiara for the next round of talks in Burnham.¹⁰ On 30 September and 1 October 1997, Australian air force aircraft picked up delegates from locations in PNG and the Solomon Islands for another round of talks at Burnham.¹¹ Downer and his Cabinet colleague, Ian McLachlan, the Minister for Defence, had combined well to underwrite the New Zealand efforts by transporting a broad representation of delegates from both the PNG Government and PNGDF, as well as from Bougainville, to Burnham.

On 10 October 1997, all parties represented at Burnham signed the Burnham Truce Agreement.¹² It contained a timetable for renewal of a new peace process. There was a clause calling for the PNG Government to invite in a neutral peacekeeping force to monitor the truce.¹³ The signing of the Burnham Truce Agreement did not trigger engagement with the NZDF and the ADF on arrangements for participation in a regional truce monitoring group. Major General Frank Hickling, Land Commander—Australia, authorised contingency planning at his headquarters.¹⁴

Combined Planning and Reconnaissance

Lieutenant General John Sanderson, the Chief of the Army, called Colonel David Hurley into his office on 20 October 1997 to advise him to be prepared to accompany Mortlock and a small team of diplomats and military officers to PNG and Bougainville later in the month.¹⁵ Presumably, Sanderson had anticipated deployment of Australian army personnel to Bougainville and had selected Hurley because he had been an adviser to the PNG Government for Operation *Lagoon*.

The next day, Mortlock and his chief of staff for the coming operation, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Cassidy, met with New Zealand diplomats in Wellington.¹⁶ They assessed that there was uneven support for a New Zealand-led regional monitoring operation in Bougainville among senior Australian Defence officers and officials in Canberra. The New Zealand diplomats concluded, however, that the expectations generated by the Burnham Truce and the obvious willingness of Howard and Downer to support New Zealand initiatives would overcome reservations in the Australian Department of Defence.¹⁷

After meetings in Canberra, Mortlock led a Resource Group, comprised of Australian and New Zealand diplomats and military officers, to PNG to assess

expectations for a truce monitoring group.¹⁸ On 28 October, Major General Jim Connolly warned his component commanders and their staffs not to conduct any planning because it was premature to develop options for ADF involvement in Bougainville before the receipt of strategic guidance from Canberra.¹⁹ Coincidentally, on the same day, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley Gunder, Hickling's senior plans officer, issued a draft concept for operations²⁰ and force structure for a truce monitoring group supported by a 170-strong logistic support team to staff at Land Headquarters and Headquarters Logistic Support Force (HQ LSF), seeking their input.²¹

Staff at Australian Defence Headquarters (ADHQ), Headquarters Australian Theatre (HQ AST), the environmental headquarters (Maritime, Land, and Air), and Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (DJFHQ) had been following developments in Bougainville with great interest in the media. More particularly, they monitored the progress of the Resource Group through Hurley's daily reports that were distributed concurrently to each level of command. They waited impatiently for guidance and authority to take action. Colonel John Culleton, Colonel (Operations) at Land Headquarters, directed his staff to send out a situation report on Bougainville on 3 November 1997. This report was a thinly-disguised warning order. Culleton had assessed that it was easier to apologise than to ask permission.²² It alerted DJFHQ and LSF that ADF logistic elements would most likely be deployed to Bougainville soon. Connolly sharply criticised Culleton for 'jumping the gun' through his Chief of Staff, Air Commodore Angus Houston.²³ The Strategic Watch Group met on 4 November and Land Headquarters staff acquired a copy of a warning order drafted by General John Baker's staff later that evening.²⁴ Baker issued his warning order later that night, while Connolly issued his own warning order the following day (5 November 1997), which included ordering the immediate deployment of planning and liaison officers to New Zealand—a rush was on. Baker's warning order foreshadowed ADF involvement in Bougainville, but it provided no guidance on the nature of ADF support or deployment timings. Despite this warning, Connolly continued to put contingency planning on hold for a truce monitoring group until further clarification arrived from Canberra.²⁵

On 6 November 1997, the Resource Group recommended that a peacekeeping organisation, called the Truce Monitoring Group (TMG), be established, comprising 85 monitors and 65 support troops not including helicopter support.²⁶ It was a very optimistic assessment of the number of support troops that would be required. Military staffs in Canberra and Sydney now waited expectantly for the outcomes of discussions between Baker and Birks. By this time, Hickling's staff had assessed that a 170-strong logistic and communications support force, including a headquarters supplemented by intelligence capabilities, would be

required to support about 85 monitors deployed in four teams around Bougainville, and that HMAS *Tobruk* was needed.²⁷

Planning and Deployment

It was now up to Baker and Birks to issue strategic guidance for planning, preparation and despatch of troops for what was to become known as Operation *Bel Isi*. Lieutenant Colonel David Bell, a senior logistic officer from HQ AST, and Majors Gary Watman and Roger Holmes, from Culleton's planning staff, left for New Zealand on 6 November 1997. Culleton soon knew through informal channels opened with DFAT that Howard had told McLachlan and Downer that, when the New Zealanders deployed to Bougainville, it was diplomatically and politically essential that ADF personnel deploy with them.²⁸ After Watman arrived in New Zealand on 6 November, he informed Culleton that the NZDF was planning to send a reconnaissance group to Buka on or about 17 November and an advance party and main body of troops would depart for Bougainville by the end of November. Based on these timings, Hickling and his staff had about three weeks to assemble, prepare and dispatch a support force comprised of headquarters and logistic support personnel as well as their vehicles, equipment and stocks to Bougainville.

On Thursday 6 November 1997, Connolly's staff considered the Resource Group Report and a brief prepared by DFAT officials in Canberra advising the Government of possible options for supporting the TMG.²⁹ The question was: 'What type of organisation would be required to support 85 monitors from New Zealand, Fiji and possibly Vanuatu, dispersed in four or more team sites around Bougainville?' Authors of the brief recommended that the Australian Government opt for 85 monitors supported by 65 troops as had been recommended by the Resources Group. They preferred the figure of 150 personnel, but recognised that 'the group is limited in logistic support capability'.³⁰ A TMG of '220 plus' personnel was discussed in the brief as more logistically viable, but dismissed because the ADF was about to support drought relief operations in PNG [Operation *Sierra*] as well as the TMG.³¹ For their parts, Baker and Connolly wanted the NZDF to assume as much logistic support responsibility in Bougainville as possible and to limit ADF support to delivering stocks to a port and an airfield.³² The New Zealanders would be responsible for distribution of stocks from these two points of entry and providing tactical air and ground transport, as well as communications, medical, repair, maintenance and engineering support.³³

By Friday 7 November, the ADF and the NZDF, in consultation with their respective foreign affairs departments, had agreed to some key appointments. Mortlock would command the TMG with an Australian colonel as his Chief of Staff. Hickling offered Colonel Steve Joske, his Colonel (Artillery), to fill this

appointment. He also recommended Lieutenant Colonel Paul Rogers, Commander, 9 Force Support Battalion, based in Randwick, Sydney, to command an ANZAC logistic support team. This composite unit would provide a range of logistic services to HQ TMG and monitoring teams.³⁴

Over the weekend 8 and 9 November 1997, staff in Canberra, Sydney, Auckland and Wellington developed those documents that would decide the structure and set the direction for the TMG. On 9 November, at a theatre commanders' meeting convened by Connolly, there was some robust discussion about the timings for deploying reconnaissance groups, advance parties and the main body of ADF personnel and equipment to Bougainville. Hickling, who knew the New Zealand timetable, wanted as much warning and authority as possible so that he and his staff could give subordinate headquarters and troops time to prepare. After several specific questions, Connolly promised Hickling that there would be over two weeks warning and preparation time before assigned units would begin a period of specific force preparation. This subsequent preparation period would comprise three days for personnel to prepare in their units and a 14-day training period in Sydney before deployment. Connolly appeared to be unaware of the New Zealand timetable or had chosen to ignore it.³⁵ He appeared to have missed the point in the DFAT advice to the Australian Government of 6 November that the TMG could be assembled in two weeks and that New Zealand was

willing to put [its] own people (including support personnel) into Bougainville as soon as practicable after 14 November. Notwithstanding ADF planning constraints, if we are to have any influence Australia must not be seen to [be] lagging behind New Zealand support for the TMG.³⁶

As ADF planning began over the weekend of 8 and 9 November, differences of opinion emerged over the ADF deployment timetable and whether 65 logistic personnel were sufficient to support 85 monitors in four dispersed locations. Hickling was convinced that the New Zealand deployment timetable would apply because the New Zealanders were in command and it was the Australian Government's intention to support their efforts.³⁷ Connolly's staff assessed that, as the ADF was providing the strategic lift and most logistic and higher level communications support, Connolly's timetable would apply.³⁸

Birks issued a planning directive to a Joint Operational Commanders Group on Monday 10 November to prepare a plan for a NZ-led TMG for what was then called Operation *Polygon* by Friday 14 November 1997.³⁹ Birks' timetable for reconnaissance and deployment of force elements was ambitious. He wanted the composition of a reconnaissance party to accompany the plan on 14 November.⁴⁰ He envisaged the NZ Cabinet giving approval for his planning directive on 11 November and authorising deployment of a reconnaissance group on

18 November with the concurrence of the PNG Government. An advance party would arrive in Bougainville six days later on 24 November and the main body of personnel and *matériel* would arrive by sea a week later, on or about 2 December 1997. Presumably, Birks anticipated the ADF conforming to these timings.

Connolly's staff released a second warning order on 11 November that conformed to Birks' deployment timings.⁴¹ The mission was, 'to co-ordinate the provision of selected ADF administrative elements in support to the [TMG] in order to promote conditions for success of truce monitoring operations in Bougainville'.⁴² He tasked Hickling to prepare an ADF reconnaissance group for movement to Bougainville in five days time, an advance party to move in 17 days time on 28 November by air, and the main body of troops to leave by sea on HMAS *Tobruk* in 19 days time on 30 November, with an arrival planned for 6 December in Loloho, the port near Arawa. Connolly's intention at this time was to command ADF participation himself until he was ready to delegate responsibilities to either Hickling or the commander of the joint deployable headquarters in Brisbane, Major General Tim Ford. Within minutes of receiving Connolly's warning order, Hickling's staff released a warning order to concentrate, train and administer a reconnaissance group in Sydney.

Guidance from Birks and Connolly, on 10 and 11 November respectively, triggered urgent NZDF and ADF planning for Operation *Bel Isi*.⁴³ After months of warning, the ADF and NZDF were about to begin combined planning for the deployment of a TMG that had to be on its way to Bougainville in less than three weeks. The only land force elements on this notice to move were members of 3rd Brigade in Townsville. However logistic personnel earmarked for deployment would be coming from Rogers' 9 Force Support Battalion (FSB), which was on several months notice to move. Given the agreed timetable for deployment, individuals and units looked like receiving very little time to prepare at home locations before concentration in Sydney. Rogers' troops may not have been on the right notice to move, but they were in the right place to move from.

Despite the receipt of a warning order on 11 November to prepare a reconnaissance group by 18 November, Hickling was concerned that higher-level planning processes were already falling behind the political and diplomatic timetable, and that pre-deployment preparation would be rushed. While he and his staff could dispatch a reconnaissance group quickly, there was an urgent need to identify, concentrate and prepare both an advance party and the main body of troops with their vehicles, equipment and stocks. It would be embarrassing if the New Zealanders and regional monitors arrived in Bougainville and the ADF did not have logistic arrangements in place to support them. Connolly's assurances to Hickling on 9 November were now redundant. Birks' timetable meant that an ADF reconnaissance group would have less than six

days to concentrate in Sydney and conduct pre-deployment preparations. An advance party would also have less than a week after that to prepare, unless Hickling received authority to issue a warning order soon that specified the composition and pre-deployment timetable for an advance party and the bulk of the force.

The problem was a disagreement in New Zealand among ADF and NZDF planning staffs on the composition of the TMG.⁴⁴ By 13–14 November 1997, planning for Operation *Bel Isi* split into two processes. At the strategic and operational levels of command in Canberra, Sydney and Wellington, staff debated concepts for operations and discussed two proposals for the structure of the TMG. Concurrently, they prepared briefs for senior ADF officers and Defence officials who were concerned about aspects of Operation *Bel Isi*—especially force protection now that the New Zealanders had decided to go unarmed. The tactical levels of command in New Zealand and Australia were seized by Birks' deployment timetable and began issuing warnings informally in anticipation of the results of higher level negotiations.

With strategic negotiations bogged down, Hickling's staff took risks and warned units informally based on the contingency of a 260-strong TMG: 175 Australian and New Zealand logistic and communications personnel supporting 85 monitors. Cassidy at the army camp at Linton, New Zealand, also issued warning orders for a 260-strong TMG, with contingencies for it to deploy to Bougainville with or without ADF support.⁴⁵ While the strategic level of command continued developing a combined concept for operations and negotiating numbers, the lower levels of command in Australia and New Zealand began a race to prepare, pack, load and go.

Specific Force Preparation

On the evening of Friday 14 November, an ADF reconnaissance group under the command of Colonel Steve Joske, who had only received notice of his appointment as Mortlock's Chief of Staff 48 hours earlier, assembled in Randwick and began two days of training and administration. Across the Tasman Sea in New Zealand, Cassidy had set up HQ TMG in a Territorial Army depot at Linton, and was also concentrating and preparing a reconnaissance group.⁴⁶ He was in contact with Watman, a liaison officer from Land Headquarters, and Watman was in contact with Culleton, who had returned from negotiations in New Zealand. Joske and his team packed for a 90-day deployment, despite being briefed by HQ AST staff that the reconnaissance would last for six days and the team would return to brief preparing troops. Joske received advice from Hickling's staff that his team would be obliged to continue liaison after arrival in Bougainville rather than return to Australia to inform specific force preparation.⁴⁷

While reconnaissance groups assembled in Randwick and Linton, negotiations continued at the higher levels in Canberra and Wellington. Hickling's staff hoped that a 260-strong TMG would be endorsed, because they had taken the risk of warning out troops based on that structure and advising them of New Zealand intentions. Time was of the essence, because it would be necessary for these units and individuals to top up with stocks and pack, and then concentrate in Sydney and embark in less than two weeks.

On Monday 17 November 1997, Downer and McLachlan issued a joint statement advising the Australian Government's acceptance of an invitation from the PNG Government to participate in the TMG and the deployment of 'a small joint Australian and New Zealand advance party ... in the very near future'.⁴⁸ The next day, Joske's reconnaissance group flew to Townsville. After they lifted off, Connolly assumed command from Hickling. Baker's intention was to have Joske meet up with the New Zealand reconnaissance group in Townsville, fly to Port Moresby for a briefing from the PNG Government, and then fly to Buka from Port Moresby. Staff at HQ AST told Joske and his deputy, Paul Rogers, that they would be in Townsville for at least 48 hours, awaiting the arrival of the New Zealanders before leaving on or about 21 November.⁴⁹

At about 7.00 p.m. on 18 November 1997, Watman advised staff at Land Headquarters that the New Zealand reconnaissance party was going to fly out at midnight (New Zealand-time) to Buka. There was no intention to rendezvous with Joske's group in Townsville. After receiving a telephone call from Connolly's staff at 10.30 p.m., Joske flew out to Buka the following morning.⁵⁰ The New Zealanders were maintaining their schedule for deployment to Bougainville, while the ADF was still catching up.

As the NZDF and ADF reconnaissance groups flew to Buka on 19 November, Hickling's staff issued the next warning order for the concentration and preparation of an advance party. At the same time, ADF and NZDF staff in Wellington and Auckland continued to refine a combined concept for operations for Operation *Bel Isi*. Realising that the New Zealand timetable was being executed despite delays in confirming a concept for operations and structure for the TMG, Hickling's staff went ahead with training and administrations for a 260-strong force.

Deployment

The New Zealand reconnaissance party arrived at Buka on 20 November 1997. An enthusiastic crowd of Bougainvilleans gave Colonel Clive Lilley and his team a warm welcome. Joske's group arrived soon after and they joined a nearby reception function guided by the New Zealand defence attaché, Wing Commander Athol Forrest. Lilley's priority was to move his engineer troop commander and group of engineers across the Buka Passage, a body of water separating the

northern and southern islands of Bougainville, and then to drive south. His objectives were to report back on the viability of the route to Arawa and then to proceed to Arawa so as to begin negotiations and preparations for opening the nearby port at Loloho and the airfield at Kieta.⁵¹ Initially, Joske thought that Lilley was moving too quickly. The group could afford to wait until the next day to settle in and issue comprehensive orders before crossing the Buka Passage and heading south. Lilley pointed out that he had issued his orders in New Zealand before departure. Joske could decide to accompany his engineers down the road or be left behind. Joske and his group joined the New Zealanders and crossed the Buka Passage later that afternoon.⁵² For his part, Forrest hired a helicopter for Lilley, who flew out for Arawa late that afternoon to begin negotiations with the BRA and local authorities for accommodation and facilities for the TMG. Diplomatically and militarily, the ADF appeared to be flatfooted.

The NZDF and the ADF had differing views on what this phase of Operation *Bel Isi* was supposed to achieve. Connolly and his staff had a traditional sequential view of reconnaissance. Joske and his group would return to Australia and report back before the advance party and the main body of troops departed. The New Zealanders envisaged their reconnaissance group, acting more like an advance party, reporting back *en route* and opening up a forward headquarters at Arawa, the port at Loloho and the Kieta airfield in preparation for the imminent arrival of ships and aircraft carrying troops and *matériel*. Lilley's group also engaged and reassured Bougainvillean leaders and the populace about the TMG mission. Australian planners had not anticipated this political task. Joske had neither linguistic nor public relations support, while Lilley had several interpreters in his team. With hindsight, neither the NZDF nor the ADF had fully anticipated the political requirements. The arrival of the first elements of the TMG was significant, but could not be exploited because Lilley had to fly south as soon as possible to prepare the way for the remainder of the TMG. During their journey south, that began from the other side of the Buka Passage early on 20 November, Joske had to disappoint most villages on the way that had organised welcoming ceremonies for them—a culturally clumsy start for the TMG.⁵³

The 170-kilometre journey south to Arawa took 11 hours because of the need to cross several rivers and damaged bridges, and to collect engineer information along the way.⁵⁴ For Connolly and his staff at HQ AST, this was an anxious period. They were unable to communicate with Joske and his group, who had taken their satellite communications with them on the drive south. This Inmarsat equipment, the same type that had been fitted to HMAS *Tobruk* for Operation *Lagoon*, could not operate from moving vehicles. Lilley left a rear link signals detachment at Buka to communicate with HQ TMG in New Zealand and to maintain tactical-level communications with his group during the potentially

dangerous journey south. Much to his reported chagrin, Connolly and his staff had to use this New Zealand link to ascertain movements and progress.⁵⁵

In the following days, Rogers spent a frustrating time trying to obtain information from HQ AST on the composition of the TMG and what stocks and equipment were about to be loaded on HMAS *Tobruk*. He needed to know how much accommodation and working space was required at Loloho, and whether there were sufficient tents, camp stores and other items being loaded on HMAS *Tobruk* to satisfy requirements. Rogers was not receiving any information from logistic planners at HQ LSF (in both Randwick and Land Headquarters), who were responsible for loading HMAS *Tobruk*. He commented in his diary that there appeared to be no combined planning with the New Zealanders, ineffective coordination of logistic preparations at HQ AST and no understanding among HQ AST staff of the need for him to influence what was being loaded. He wondered why he was on a reconnaissance if his information was not being used to inform logistic preparations. He knew what conditions were like on the ground and what resources would be needed to clean up Loloho port and get logistics operating efficiently.⁵⁶ For their parts, Connolly and his staff were not responsible for force preparation. They may have been seized by the fate of Joske and his reconnaissance group in Bougainville and less interested in the fate of *matériel* being assembled on wharves and loaded at Woolloomooloo—the navy’s fleet base on Sydney Harbour.

Rogers’ other observation at the time was that Connolly’s staff were micro-managing and minimising the numbers of army personnel. However, there was no similar examination of maritime or aircrew numbers. The navy and the air force could decide on the numbers needed to support an operation but the ‘army was given a number and told to get on with it’.⁵⁷ Rogers wondered why higher levels of command caused so much disruption and disappointment among army personnel who had trained together and wanted to deploy together on operations. Staff officers had directed him to downsize his logistic support elements at short notice and form *ad hoc* organisations that had neither trained nor worked together. None of these decisions were made with the benefit of reconnaissance. Now that he needed more personnel to clean up the wharf area at Loloho and help set up logistic support facilities and accommodation areas, staff advised him no further personnel were available, even on a temporary basis. The figures for the TMG appeared to have been decided on or rounded off by senior officers and their staffs without the benefit of an analysis of the roles and tasks of HQ TMG and Rogers’ logistic support team, or reconnaissance.⁵⁸

Connolly’s staff issued an operation order for Operation *Bel Isi* just after midnight on 20 November 1997. This was the first formal guidance since 11 November. It gave five days warning for the dispatch of an advance party and nine days for a main body of troops. Staff at Land Headquarters had warned

Colonel Jeff Wilkinson, Commander LSF, and his staff earlier in November about the forthcoming deployment. Soon after receiving the operation order from HQ AST, Hickling's staff nominated HQ LSF as the mounting headquarters for Operation *Bel Isi*. Aside from assembling, training and administering personnel using his Deployed Forces Support Unit, Wilkinson's major challenge was to concentrate stocks, vehicles and equipment at Woolloomooloo and load HMAS *Tobruk*. He and his staff had to meet these practical challenges in less than 10 days. On 23 November, an advance party arrived in Randwick for three days pre-deployment training and administration. On the afternoon of 26 November, after the advance party flew out to Bougainville from Richmond, the main body of troops arrived. Concurrently, Wilkinson's staff organised the concentration of heavy engineering equipment, a number of Land Cruisers, Land Rovers and heavy vehicles as well as tonnes of equipment and stocks at Woolloomooloo.

Birks and Connolly signed a combined operation plan on 27 November—too late to influence specific force preparation or deployment. HMAS *Tobruk* sailed on 29 November 1997.⁵⁹ They foreshadowed that the TMG would transition into another organisation after Leaders' Talks were to be held on or about 31 January 1998. The PNG Government and representatives from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu signed an agreement for their contribution to the TMG on 5 December 1997. By that time, advance parties of the TMG had arrived in Bougainville, and the main bodies of troops were either in the air or at sea heading for Bougainville.⁶⁰

Once again, the ADF appeared to have effectively and efficiently planned, prepared and deployed force elements on time and in good order at short notice. The timely sequence of events beginning after the joint statement by Downer and McLachlan on 17 November justified this perception of Australian military force projection. Within 48 hours, a reconnaissance group left Australia. An advance party flew out on 24 November, and the main body on 30 November 1997. Based on these outcomes, Operation *Bel Isi* was an example of a synchronised diplomatic and military effort that confirmed extant arrangements and justified the introduction of COMAST and HQ AST into the ADF chain of command for operations. In reality, the New Zealanders had shown the way and unknowingly driven the ADF decision cycle. Formal processes for Australian military force projection had been too slow. It had been *ad hoc* arrangements between internal coalitions of willing staff at the tactical level within the ADF and NZDF, as well as the PNG Section at DFAT that had delivered these impressive results.

Problems with Force Command

There were problems with ADF arrangements for commanding its participation in Operation *Bel Isi* from the beginning. There was no gradual devolution of

command and control and decision-making from the strategic level to the operational level. At the strategic level, Baker delved into the tactical employment of ADF personnel by not allowing Australian military personnel to move outside the Arawa–Loloho–Kieta area, or for female Australian Public Service (APS) truce monitors to deploy to monitoring team sites until security had been assessed to his satisfaction.⁶¹ At the operational level, Connolly commanded an accompanying force protection operation that restricted the employment of HMAS *Success* and its *Sea King* helicopter that were positioned in support of TMG operations in Arawa Bay.⁶² Hickling was left to command the military mechanics of Operation *Bel Isi* as the nominated lead joint commander, under the watchful eyes of Baker and Connolly. Like his predecessor, Major General Murray Blake, the lead joint commander of the battalion group deployment to Somalia in 1993, Hickling had no control over maritime or air force assets. HMAS *Tobruk* sailed immediately after unloading, and the air force refused to support Operation *Bel Isi* with a weekly courier flight from Townsville.⁶³ For his part, Mortlock resented Australian micro-management. He interpreted Baker's restrictions on his employment of Australian personnel and use of assets located in his area of operations as a lack of trust as well as confidence in his competence and judgment.⁶⁴

Joske reported to both Connolly and Hickling. Staff from both HQ AST and Land Headquarters contacted him wanting to discuss issues. He had to keep staff from both headquarters aware of the content of his conversations with staff from the other headquarters. There was much duplication of effort and reporting. The origin of this arrangement, according to Connolly's staff, was Connolly's desire to retain control of the political and military dimension of ADF involvement in Operation *Bel Isi* and also to personally direct any responses to emergencies that might threaten Australian lives.⁶⁵ Joske wrote at the time, 'I predict that before long there will be a turf battle'.⁶⁶

The NZDF arrangements for Operation *Bel Isi*, like Canadian arrangements for their contingent in Somalia in 1993, were more cohesive and cooperative. The crews of the New Zealand ships HMNZS *Canterbury* and HMNZS *Endeavour* and their embarked helicopters became active participants in the clean up and establishment of the logistic support team at Loloho, as well as monitoring team sites at Buin and Tonu in southern Bougainville in early December 1997.

Arguably, split Australian command and control arrangements increased risk. In a complex emergency, such as an armed attack by Bougainvillean hardliners opposed to the peace process that resulted in TMG casualties, both Connolly's and Hickling's staff would become involved simultaneously, while staff from Maritime and Air headquarters would also become involved in tasking ships and aircraft. The ADF appeared to still have some way to go in

synchronising joint command and coordinating assigned navy, army and air force assets.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Mary Louise O'Callaghan, *Enemies Within, Double Day Australia*, Sydney, 1999; and Sean Dorney, *The Sandline Affair*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998, for detailed accounts of the circumstances and outcomes of what became known as the Sandline Affair.

² Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, 'Hidden Agenda', *Australian Magazine*, 14–15 August 1999, pp. 28–33.

³ Brigadier Roger C. Mortlock in interview with author, 27 October 1998.

⁴ New Zealand Press Association, Australian Foreign Press and Australian Associated Press correspondents, 'NZ talks aim at ending Bougainville crisis', *The Australian*, 3 July 1997.

⁵ 'The Burnham Declaration, By Bougainville Leaders on the Re-establishment of a Process for Lasting Peace and Justice on Bougainville', 5–18 July 1997, paragraphs 4–5. Copy held by author. Text included as Appendix A in (eds) Monica Wehner and Donald Denoon, *Without a gun: Australians' experiences monitoring peace in Bougainville, 1997–2001*, Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2001.

⁶ David Barber, 'Bougainville rebels free five soldiers in goodwill gesture', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 1997.

⁷ Correspondent in Wellington, 'Anzac force on cards for Bougainville', *Weekend Australian*, 23–24 August 1997.

⁸ Lindsay Murdoch, 'Troops may join PNG mission', *Age*, 21 August 1997.

⁹ A correspondent in Wellington, 'ANZAC Force on Cards for Bougainville', *Weekend Australian*, 24 August 1997.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Barker, '\$100m in extra PNG aid but troops not on the agenda', *Australian Financial Review*, 26 August 1997; and Craig Skehan, '\$100m to rebuild war-torn island', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 1997.

¹¹ Lindsay Murdoch, 'Australia flies rebels from Bougainville', *Age*, 30 September 1997.

¹² Copy held by author. Text included as Appendix B in Wehner and Denoon, *Without a gun: Australians' experiences monitoring peace in Bougainville, 1997–2001*.

¹³ See David Barber and Craig Skehan, 'PNG pact with rebels', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 1997; and Jane Dunbar, 'Bougainville truce creates climate for lasting peace treaty', *Weekend Australian*, 11–12 October 1997.

¹⁴ The author was working full time at Land Headquarters during this period and attended all the meetings of Hickling's Bougainville Watch Group. The first meeting was on 26 September 1997. Hickling recognised the high probability of ADF force elements deploying to Bougainville in November after the signing of the Burnham Truce Agreement. He authorised contingency planning and other preparations, such as updating maps, identifying availability of logistic force elements and gathering intelligence. On 3 November 1997, the author briefed him on lessons from Operation *Solace* and Operation *Lagoon*.

¹⁵ Lieutenant Colonel David J. Hurley in interview with author, 3 March 1998.

¹⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Richard P. Cassidy in interview with author, 8 February 1998. Cassidy was Mortlock's senior NZDF staff officer and chief negotiator for Operation *Bel Isi*.

¹⁷ Cassidy in interview with author, 8 February 1998.

¹⁸ Resources Team comprised Brigadier Roger C. Mortlock, John Hayes, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, David Irvine, Australian Ambassador to PNG, Greg L. Moriarty, PNG Section, DFAT, Colonel David J. Hurley, Lieutenant Colonel Richard P. Cassidy, Nigel Moore, New Zealand Embassy, PNG.

¹⁹ Author's note in his personal diary on 28 October 1997.

²⁰ **concept for operations:** A verbal or graphic statement, in broad outline, of a commander's assumptions or intent in regard to an operation or series of operations. The **concept of operations** frequently is embodied in campaign plans and operation plans; in the latter case, particularly when the plans cover a series of connected operations to be carried out simultaneously or in succession. The concept is designed to give an overall picture of the operation. It is included primarily for additional clarity of purpose. Also called 'commander's concept' or CONOPS (DOD).

- ²¹ Lieutenant Colonel Ashley L. Gunder, 'CONOPS—Truce Monitoring Group (Bougainville)', email, 28 October 1997. Copy held by author.
- ²² Author's note in personal diary, 3 November 1997.
- ²³ Author's note in personal diary, 3 November 1997. Colonel John J. Culleton in discussions with the author during this period. In early November 1997, the author attended all the meetings related to the deployment to Bougainville convened in Land Headquarter.
- ²⁴ Note in author's diary, 4 November 1997.
- ²⁵ Note in author's diary, 4 November 1997.
- ²⁶ Resource Group Report on a Proposed Truce Monitoring Group for Bougainville, undated, but covered by a facsimile sheet signed by Hurley on 6 November 1997. Copy held by author.
- ²⁷ Gunder in discussions with author in early November 1997. Gunder was Staff Officer Grade 1 (Joint Plans) at Land Headquarters. He chaired the Bougainville Watch Group and coordinated contingency planning. He had been receiving copies of Hurley's daily progress reports from the Resource Group.
- ²⁸ Discussions between the author and DFAT officials in November 1997.
- ²⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Bougainville—Australian Involvement in a Truce Monitoring Group', Brief prepared by DFAT for the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, 6 November 1997. A copy was distributed informally to all levels of ADF command. The author received a copy on 7 November 1997. Copy held by the author.
- ³⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Bougainville—Australian Involvement in a Truce Monitoring Group', p. 2.
- ³¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Bougainville—Australian Involvement in a Truce Monitoring Group', p. 3.
- ³² General John S. Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005.
- ³³ Colonel John J. Culleton to author at the time. Culleton attended most of Major General Jim Connolly's briefings and staff planning meeting at HQ AST in early November. Baker confirmed that it was Australian Prime Minister John Howard's intent for ADF elements to accompany NZDF elements into Bougainville (General John S. Baker in interview with author, 30 August 2005.)
- ³⁴ Notes in author's personal diary, 7 November 1997.
- ³⁵ Hickling passed on this information to Culleton on Monday 10 November 1997.
- ³⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Bougainville—Australian involvement in a Truce Monitoring Group', p. 4.
- ³⁷ Hickling briefed his staff to this effect on Monday 10 November 1997. Notes in author's diary, 10 November 1997.
- ³⁸ Interview and discussions, Culleton.
- ³⁹ Lieutenant General Alan L. Birks, 'Planning Directive by the Chief of the Defence Force to Brigadier J.A. Dennistoun-Wood, Chairman, Joint Operational Commanders Group (JOCG) for Operation POLYGON, Bougainville Truce Monitoring Group', CDF Directive 13/97, 10 November 1997, HQ NZDF 03130/PNG/1. Copy held by author.
- ⁴⁰ Birks, 'Planning Directive by the Chief of the Defence Force to Brigadier J.A. Dennistoun-Wood, Chairman, Joint Operational Commanders Group (JOCG) for Operation POLYGON, Bougainville Truce Monitoring Group', CDF Directive 13/97, 10 November 1997, HQ NZDF 03130/PNG/1, p. 5.
- ⁴¹ COMAST 'Warning Order for OP Terrier', COMAST 9/97, 11 November 1997. Copy held by author.
- ⁴² COMAST 'Warning Order for OP Terrier', COMAST 9/97, 11 November 1997. Copy held by author.
- ⁴³ Originally the NZDF named the operation to support the TMG *Polygon* and ADHQ named ADF participation as *Terrier*.
- ⁴⁴ Culleton in telephone discussion with author, 14 November 1997. Notes in author's diary, 14 November 1997. Culleton was in New Zealand with ADF negotiators.
- ⁴⁵ Cassidy in interview with author, 8 February 1998
- ⁴⁶ Hickling informed Joske on Thursday 13 November after breaking a deadlock, on whether he or Major General Tim Ford, COMD DJFHQ, would be the lead joint commander for Operation *Bel Isi*, by having Lieutenant General John Sanderson intervene with Baker personally to press Connolly to make an appointment so orders and instructions could be issued.
- ⁴⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Paul M. Rogers, Personal diary entry, 15–16 November 1997. Copy held by author.

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⁴⁸ Australian Government, 'Joint Statement The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hon Alexander Downer and the Minister for Defence Hon Ian McLachlan, Australian Participation in the Bougainville Truce Monitoring Group', FA 140, 17 November 1997. Copy held by author.

⁴⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Paul M. Rogers in mobile telephone discussion with author, 18 November 1997.

⁵⁰ Colonel Steve K. Joske, Commander's Diary entry, 19 November 1997. Copy held by author.

⁵¹ Colonel Clive W. Lilley, Interview with author, 25 October 1998.

⁵² Colonel Steve K. Joske, Commander's diary entry, 20 November 1998. Copy held by author.

⁵³ Diary entry, Rogers, 20 November 1997.

⁵⁴ Diary entry, Rogers, 20 November 1997.

⁵⁵ Major John G. Howard in interview with author, 10 February 1998. Howard, a NZDF Special Forces officer, was a member of Lilley's reconnaissance party and then operations officer for Monitoring Team Buin.

⁵⁶ Diary entry, Rogers, 24 November 1998.

⁵⁷ Diary entry, Rogers, 27 November 1998.

⁵⁸ The author monitored issues related to numbers for Operation *Bel Isi* soon after the Resources Group submitted their report on 6 November, nominating a 150-person structure. There was no logistician in the group to point out that this was unworkable. Subsequently, after exhaustive analysis, the bare minimum was assessed by staff in both New Zealand and Australia as 264 personnel. The final cap figure issued by HQAST was 250, suggesting that the 264 figure had been arbitrarily rounded off.

⁵⁹ Major General Alan L. Birks and Major General Jim M. Connolly, 'Combined AS/NZ Operational Plan Operation BEL ISI', HQNZDF 03130/PNG/1, 27 November 1997. Copy held by author.

⁶⁰ 'Agreement between PNG, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand and Vanuatu Concerning the Neutral Truce Monitoring Group for Bougainville', signed in Port Moresby, 5 December 1997. Copy held by author.

⁶¹ Brigadier Roger C. Mortlock in interview with author, 27 October 1998.

⁶² Classified sources.

⁶³ Interview with Rogers; and Letter from Hickling.

⁶⁴ Mortlock in interview with author, 27 October 1998.

⁶⁵ Discussions with Culleton.

⁶⁶ Commander's diary entry, Joske, 13 December 1997.