

CA's OPENING ADDRESS

2008 CA MILITARY HISTORY CONFERENCE

Distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this year's Chief of Army's Military History Conference. I have watched the progress and development of these conferences over the years and regard them now to be a major element in both the development of Army's professional military education and in our interaction with the Australian community.

The study of military history is important. It forms a part of our learning cycle. What is happening on operations today is the history of tomorrow. For that reason we need to be attentive to the preservation of operational records, both as the raw material of future historians, but also as vital element of our lessons learned process.

The recent changes that I introduced to overhaul our command and control structures are designed in part to improve our learning and adaptation cycles. They are also with the changes in ADF command and control most visibly represented by the establishment of Joint Operations Command at Bungendore.

The reality of Army's operational culture is that we collaborate closely with the RAAF and RAN. We need to, most urgently in my opinion, bring that joint focus to bear in the way that we record and study our history.

The days when individual unit histories really tells us very much about an operation are long gone. A challenge for us is to bring Army History into the era of 'jointery' along with all our structures and systems, especially those which gather and analyse the information from our operations.

For that reason I am delighted to introduce this years theme, which considers the issue of the media and the military. This is a topic that has immediate contemporary relevance to us as we

conduct operations both in the immediate region and further afield.

Of course the concept of journalists embedded with our units in the Middle East is not a new one. The great chronicler of the exploits of the First AIF-Charles Bean- was a working journalist. Through the intervention of Bridges's Chief of Staff, Cyril Brudnell White, he enjoyed a level of access to the leadership of the First Australian Division from the time it embarked for Egypt, that modern journalists can only envy. His record speaks for itself.

However, both warfare and the media have undergone enormous changes since that time. The speed and pervasiveness of media coverage today is breathtaking. In an era where Armies take pride in their agility, responsiveness to events, and devolved decision making- 'mission command' in our jargon- the media leaves us for dead.

Our processes look ponderous by comparison with the instantaneous transmission of images and information of which the reporter on the ground is now capable. And media structures are leaner and flatter than ours. In Iraq and Afghanistan today the roles have been reversed. Commanders often first receive operational information from open sources, whereas the old paradigm was that the media used every device at its disposal to try to elicit operational information from commanders.

This has produced tensions in a relationship that by its very nature makes uneasy bedfellows. There is an element of fundamental incompatibility between the soldier's emphasis on secrecy and operational security, and the media's desire for maximum transparency. However, we cannot allow this to force us into an adversarial relationship, nor can we adopt a siege mentality. One of the unfortunate legacies of the Vietnam War was the popular myth that the media undermined the war effort. I do not think such recriminations are useful nor are they factually correct.

The media is now a permanent fixture in the very cluttered, and dynamic battle space in which we are obliged to operate.

Soldiers need to allow for and mitigate 'friction', rather than complaining about it. The presence of the media merely adds one more element of unpredictability to the complexity of the battle space. Modern commanders need to better understand the imperatives which drive journalists, just as we need to provide the media with an ethical and military rationale for our actions. I would like to think that this more outward culture will actually assist us in lifting our performance.

But like any relationship that is going to endure the shock and complexity of the operational environment, the military/media relationship needs to be exercised in peace-time. We need to focus on how to develop those aspects that we have in common rather than stereotyping one another. We both serve the public interest and we both want to bring all our people safely home if at all possible. Our planning and decision making processes now routinely take into account the presence of the media, along with a host of other Non Government actors. I believe that we need to

exercise and rehearse with the media more before we go on operations. Some level of trust and confidence building will benefit both parties to this arrangement.

While there are no easy solutions to the way media and military organisations interact in the battle space, I am confident that this conference will provoke serious discussion of these issue through the study of how they have been handled in the past. We have assembled a world class field of experts for that purpose.

Before formally opening this conference, however, I do wish to raise an issue that is a growing concern for historians and soldiers alike. In discussing the role of the media in the battle-space, I alluded to the speed with which information is transmitted and recorded. In the past the cliché was that the journalist was writing the first draft of history. But we need to be vigilant that it does not become the only draft of history. There is a risk that the era of instant communication does not become the era of transient information storage.

I have real concerns about the future capacity of historians to write the history of Army's operations and development today. I perceive that a growing and largely unforeseen consequence of the evolving technology of command and communication will be the complete absence of the essential building blocks of the historian's trade. Most of you here have some understanding of the process: finding and collecting evidence, weighing its relevance, assembling it and presenting it as the justification for an assessment of what happened. And most of you will be familiar with the basic components of this trade – written records.

Can I ask you all a question? How would you operate in an environment in which there were no records? How would you analyse, for example, the operations of the Reconstruction Task Force in Afghanistan if none of the material, files, records, maps, intelligence summaries, signals, op orders and so on existed? It would be a challenge. It has happened before. For example, I understand that one of the most difficult periods for historians is the early medieval period, where the lack of

substantial primary source written records can only be partially offset by archaeological or similar hard physical evidence.

Given the way the military conducts its business today, I am concerned we are preparing to impose on future historians our own version of the ‘dark ages.’

You are all well aware of the impact of electronic communication on our private lives. Few people write letters – e-mail reigns supreme. Mobile phones are now the preferred means of interpersonal communication. FaceBook has even started to push mass e-mail into redundancy as a means of people keeping their friends informed of developments in their lives. We all know this. We also all know that the military, especially the military on deployment, is just as switched on to communications technology as today’s youth. Indeed, telecommunications contractors arrive on the battlefield almost simultaneously with the lead scout and installs satellite communications for the diggers to call home on what we call welfare phones.

The problem, as we all know, is that when the phone call ends, the hard disc is wiped clear for the next day or the FaceBook page is updated, the data in that communication is gone. We all recognise this as a problem, but no one has yet devised a solution. And as a consequence, I am concerned that the history of the Australian Army of the late 20th early 21st century is going to be a work of fiction – or of deduction and reconstruction if you prefer. Only minimal holdings of written records may survive to provide the essential underpinning evidence. Without this evidence, history is, essentially, fiction.

It is not as if we are not creating records. If anything, modern operations seem to generate even more words. The word processing power of the computer has encouraged the production of enormous quantities of reports, analyses and administrative returns. The power of the internet to send copies of this material everywhere compounds the phenomenon.

My concern is not with the production of the written evidence, it is with the capture and retention of it. And my concern is for all

types of records, not just the official ones. Those of you who specialize in the social history of conflict face a daunting challenge in the age of electronic communications. What is going to substitute for the boxes full of letters home from individuals (from privates to generals)? My own mother complains that I don't write letters home like I did when I was in Namibia.

What is going to substitute for the diaries such as Pompey Elliott left us or the exercise notes of young officers on field staff training courses? The troops in the field still make incisive observations about the mission, its conduct and command. They still voice their opinion about the food, their equipment and their interaction with the local people. How do we capture and preserve this so some future C.E.W. Bean can write the equivalent of six volumes on the private soldier's contribution to the war? It is a real challenge and I don't at this stage have any answers.

If a solution to the problem of capturing personal opinions and recollections is elusive, it is equally so for official records. You may find this hard to accept – after all, the official records of our war time operations held in the Australian War Memorial are comprehensive and extensive. But by and large, these are the records of a technologically less-advanced time. Back then, orders were written on paper, and the Orderly Room Clerk would file copies. The copies would then be attached at the end of every month to the monthly report that was prepared and sent back to the next highest headquarters and eventually found its way to the Memorial.

In theory, that should still happen, but electronically. It sometimes does but my advice is that this is more the exception than the rule. And even if it does occur, the potential for loss or destruction along the way is much greater than for a paper record. For a start, the individual can see at a glance what is on a paper record. A disc is just a disc.

Part of the problem is that we often forget the importance of good record keeping until too late. I am advised that our records from Vietnam are, for example, poor. I do not envy the Official Historians of that War their task. I am concerned though about the impact the problems with the records cause our veterans of that War in relation to their repatriation entitlements.

The new way of waging war has contributed to the problem as well. Today, we fight as both joint and combined forces. In the old days of single Service operations, we had an evolved structure of ops staff, admin staff and even records staff to prepare, collect and repatriate the records.

In Army, the War Diary was explained in Staff Duties in the Field and every officer was expected to know of its existence and the process to be followed. There was a clear hierarchy of command and a complementary hierarchy of records responsibility. Even though each Service may have had a different way of doing it, it didn't matter as the same process was contained within the same Service.

That is not the case now. Even very junior headquarters can now be comprised of a mix of the three Services, each used to conducting the records management task differently. With headquarters individually structured for the specific task, coupled with the entirely justifiable desire to ensure that all of the HQ's limited staff resources are focused on the successful conduct of that task, taking along someone whose responsibility is the collection and repatriation of the records is usually not a priority.

This generally means it is done as an afterthought and as a secondary task, by busy people with other concerns, and often who have had no training and therefore possess little understanding of the responsibility. It is unfair on them but, with constraints on the numbers permitted in the deployed force, it is now a standard situation. While we still manage to sometimes deploy specialist teams into the field for limited periods, gone are the days of the AIF Historical Records Section within the AIF Headquarters in London. Yet as the staff

resources available to deal with the task decline, the scale of the task is increasing. Both the actual volume of records, as I alluded to earlier, but more importantly, the way they are kept is providing a real challenge.

Let me provide some context. When Army deployed to East Timor, to INTERFET, a History Field Team was included. It was located within the Headquarters and managed to capture pallet loads of paper records, files and maps. It also brought back numerous CDs containing downloads of computer records.

The same team, on the basis of short term limited deployments to the Middle East, has brought back – so far anyway – mainly CDs or DVDs. In less than 10 years, the method of administering and recording an operation had gone from a mix of paper and electronic medium to almost complete electronic in its nature. Even the hard copy maps on the command post wall are merely one-off prints to support a specific activity.

First World War historians have innumerable copies of base data maps, many of which have hand drawn data superimposed upon

them, to employ when explaining the battlefield and individual operations that occurred. Current maps are produced from geospatial data and overlaid with specific data for a specific purpose. Only enough copies are made to support the mission. Unless someone literally thinks to pull one off the wall, secure it and repatriate it home, that data will be lost.

The challenge, though, is much greater than the simple matter of remembering to take down a map from a wall. The problem of format change is a major concern for the archivists. For those charged with collecting them it adds much to their task. Culling a paper file is tedious but at least each page is a self contained document: intelligible and assessable simply by reading. A CD with thousands of pages of data is still just a CD. If the capability to read what is on it is lost, then it is useless.

Yet the military, by virtue of its need for, amongst other considerations, operational security, embraces format incompatibility. We use specialist command hardware and software that is incompatible with civilian systems. We use

electronic security measures that, if we don't cancel them before that system is changed, can permanently block access to the information. In the old days, a 'Top Secret' stamp on a document and locking it in a safe controlled access but when the need for secrecy has passed, simply taking it out of the safe makes it accessible. As the Army History Unit is currently finding, receiving data on a password protected disc poses entirely different sets of access problems when the password is lost. They are still trying to crack some CDs from East Timor, and that was less than ten years ago.

Clearly this is a potential problem that won't be solved overnight or by any one individual, but it is a problem that must be solved. I am happy to advise that within the records management areas in Defence, and in the Joint Ops arena, the problem has been recognised and is being addressed. However, you people are the experts in what records need to be retained. You are the SMEs – the subject matter experts – on this. If you have a view, I urge you to pass it on to me thru the AHU. I will

certainly be giving this as a task to the Army History Advisory Committee but I would welcome any suggestions for a solution.

Having taken us away from the topic of this year's conference, it is probably time to return to it. But before I do, there are a number of people and organisations I wish to thank for making the Conference possible.

In these times of financial stringency, running a conference such as this is always a matter of balancing the returns against the costs involved. The willingness of some organisations to pick up some of the costs is therefore welcome both for the financial support and for the vote of confidence such a gesture represents for the Conference itself. If companies are willing to support the conference, they clearly think it offers something of value. I am aware we have a group of old friends as sponsors.

Defcredit is as always the major sponsor of the Conference and has filled this role for many years. As mentioned last night, Point Trading sponsors the Conference dinner, making it

accessible for a number of attendees who might not otherwise have been able to be there to witness the award of this year's CEW Bean prize to Dr Kirsty Harris.

This evening, we will again be running the networking drinks session – an opportunity for you mix and develop your contacts. We are, as ever, grateful to Defence Health for this opportunity. ID Warehouse have again provided the identification lanyards, and we thank them for their ongoing support. Finally, this Conference has acquired an outstanding international reputation due in no small part to the quality and timeliness of the published Proceedings. The support of the Department of Veterans' Affairs in sponsoring the Proceedings is therefore particularly appreciated.

On behalf of the Army, may I personally thank all our sponsors and ask that you support them in return. Please take the opportunity during a break to go and chat to them.

One of the real benefits of conducting a conference series like this one is that it gives us the chance to build relationships with experts who we might never otherwise get to know in person.

Our key note speaker is one such person.

Dr Stephen Badsey is a world recognised authority on the media, propaganda and war. He was fortunate enough to spend many years at RMA Sandhurst and has since moved on to more conventional academic activities as the Reader in Conflict Studies at the University of Wolverhampton. He is something of a media star in his own right, being a long term military historian for the BBC.

Dr Badsey is no stranger to this Conference or to Canberra, having presented a memorable address on the Boer War as a media war to the 1999 Conference. It is a genuine pleasure for me to welcome him back to the Army History Conference.

Dr Badsey, the floor is yours.