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Hizb'allah, and Air Force Culture: Introductory Comments by The Williams Foundation

The immense benefits inherent in conducting military operations jointly have been obvious since World War II. In the six decades since then, advanced defence forces have pursued the ideal of jointness with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The Australian Defence Force has been one of the more successful, and in numerous respects is a world leader. Like everything else, however, 'jointness' is relative, and notwithstanding the ADF's achievements, it would be a naïve observer who believed that the Force's present organisational arrangements represent anything like an ideal.

The cultures of navies, armies and air forces are both powerful and distinctive. On the one hand, they can promote necessary institutional qualities, such as pride in service, comradeship, loyalty, and battlefield courage. On the other hand, they can constitute almost insurmountable barriers to genuine institutional unity. It is salutary to recall, for example, that the establishment of the unified Department of Defence in 1973 was managed by a civilian, the formidable Sir Arthur Tange, not least because the government of the day suspected (reasonably) that the single services would be culturally incapable of agreeing on a workable model.

Alan Stephens' paper *Hizb'allah, and Air Force Culture* presents a point of view on how the RAAF's culture is shaped, and how it influences institutional performance. It also contends that that the kind of adaptability demonstrated almost instinctively by Hizb'allah is an essential capability for 21st century combat. The paper concludes that the RAAF's existing organisational arrangements promote divisive intra-service tribal cultures that inhibit intellectual flexibility and operational adaptability. While Dr Stephens' concern is with the RAAF, his argument could be extended to the broader ADF.

The Williams Foundation believes that the cultures and organisational arrangements of the RAN, the Australian Army, the RAAF, and the ADF are fundamental to the effectiveness and development of Australia's military capabilities. Consequently, we intend sponsoring a series of discussion papers and other forums on the topic. The Foundation may not necessarily agree with all of the conclusions of all of those initiatives, but we will continue to present a range of views in order to constructively advance this vital debate.

Hizb'allah, and Air Force Culture

Alan Stephens

Organisational arrangements serve numerous purposes, the most obvious of which is to enable the effective and efficient achievement of institutional objectives. Less obvious but no less important, those arrangements also largely shape an institution's culture. Thus, for example, a civil service's characteristic hierarchical structure, strictly defined limits of individual authority, and innate conservatism generate a particular culture; while a creative advertising agency's flat structure, individual license, and free-wheeling environment promote an entirely different mindset.

Few organisations are more intensely socialised and have stronger cultures than defence forces. Great military training establishments such as Sandhurst, West Point and Duntroon lay a claim on their graduates that lasts a lifetime, regardless of whether they serve a full career. So too, by and large, do the three separate environmental services of land, sea and air. Regardless of the modern emphasis on joint warfare, the individuals who comprise a defence force invariably identify themselves as soldiers, sailors or airmen first and as members of a joint force second.

Because institutional attitudes (and therefore preferences) are to a large extent shaped by organisational arrangements, any structure that promotes tribalism must be antithetical to a shared culture. In the decades since the immense benefits of operating jointly became apparent during World War II, leading defence forces have properly sought to break down the cultural barriers that separate the three services. Progress has been made, but it would be naïve to think that anything approaching an acceptable outcome has been reached, or is even close.

For example, although Israel has been fighting for its national survival since 1948, an official enquiry into the poorly planned invasion of Lebanon in mid-2006 ascribed blame in part to a wilful lack of cooperation between the Army and the Air Force.¹ Similarly, single-service hubris seems to have been the catalyst for the near-disaster of Operation Anaconda, a hazardous mission undertaken by the American Army in eastern Afghanistan in March 2002. In the ensuing years, Anaconda has been the subject of one of the more bitter United States Army-Air Force exchanges and, given the plethora of accusations and counter-accusations, the truth can be difficult to extract. There nevertheless seems to be a consensus among senior Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force officers that the operation was poorly conceived by Army, whose leaders deliberately left the other three services out of their planning.² Closer to home, if an article published in *The Australian* in mid-2009 is any guide, tensions continue to simmer between the Royal Australian Air Force and the Australian Army over a decision taken more than twenty years ago to transfer ownership of so-called 'battlefield' helicopters from the one to the other.³

Tribalism is not confined to the inter-service domain. Within services, divisions exist between the main operational skill categories. Those divisions are especially pronounced in air forces, in which aircrew define themselves through their membership of fighter, bomber, maritime, transport or reconnaissance units. In the RAAF, for example, the existing command structure based on Force Element Groups

reinforces the propensity to form separate cultures. RAAF squadrons (an air force's basic organisational element) are placed into one of six FEGs according to their nominal specialisation (strike, airlift, air superiority, maritime patrol, airborne early warning and control, and so on).⁴

Plainly, some kind of organisational arrangement is necessary if large numbers of people working in a complex environment are to pursue common objectives. Equally plainly, there will be an inherent tension between established organisational practices and a willingness to change in response to new circumstances.

Which leads to the central point of this paper; namely, that the imperative to overcome intellectual rigidity is the single most important challenge confronting traditional defence forces. Because of entrenched cultural beliefs, it is also the most difficult.

The ability to adapt and evolve rapidly is a *sine qua non* for success in 21st century warfare. No more striking illustration of this truism can be found than the terrorist organisation Hizb'allah. A former head of Israeli intelligence, Aharon Farkash, has concluded that Hizb'allah's remarkable ability to adapt swiftly in order to deal with emerging threats is the group's single greatest strength.⁵

Israel has annihilated scores of terrorist organisations but a handful, notably Hizb'allah and Hamas, have survived every attempt to destroy them militarily. Unlike his predecessors, most of whom had evaluated Israel's enemies in terms of military vulnerability, Farkash concentrated on identifying the characteristics that have enabled Hizb'allah and Hamas to endure. After months of detailed analysis he concluded that both are defined by their *adaptability*; and that in turn, the key to their adaptability is *organisational flexibility*.

Anytime Hizb'allah or Hamas are attacked by the Israelis in strength, the terrorists immediately modify their organisational behaviour in response to the particular form of attack. For example, cells might disperse or merge; or relocate; or change their identity; or change their roles or tactics; and so on. Small teams of communications specialists are responsible for spreading the word to the rest of the organisation to morph instantly into the form most suitable to defeat the existential threat.

At a more familiar level, it is noteworthy that the Australian Army has announced an initiative named 'Adaptive Army', with the intention of making adaptability one of its defining qualities.⁶ Whether or not its leaders can succeed in this worthy endeavour remains to be seen. If Brian Linn's masterful exposition on the US Army's 'inability to recognize the weaknesses of its intellectual traditions' is a general guide, their task will not be easy.⁷ According to Linn, the US Army's determined refusal to change its preference [wish] to fight on the plains of Europe instead of fighting terrorists is only one of many indicators of the service's cultural rigidity.

Organisational rigidity is not the sole preserve of armies. By definition, the RAAF's division into Force Element Groups promotes stovepipes; furthermore, it imposes a needless layer of ownership. As a consequence, the FEGs are inherently resistant to rapid adaptability. Perhaps worse, that resistance is not only structural, but also intellectual and emotional.

Yet paradoxically, the secular nature of the RAAF's emerging force structure stands in stark contrast to this (self-imposed) cultural straightjacket. Labelling immensely flexible weapons systems like the F-35

Joint Strike Fighter, the F/A-18 Super Hornet, the P-8 Poseidon, the KC-30 multi-role tanker-transport, and the AEW&C Wedgetail simply as 'air combat' or 'surveillance and response', and so on, seriously misrepresents their potential in other domains such as irregular warfare, air occupation, ISR, data processing, knowledge management, missile defence, and so on. Nor do such labels indicate to the lay observer the ability to generate powerful effects at a higher order of strategic interaction by, for example, shaping and deterring throughout a geographic area of interest.⁸

As the managerial aphorism has it, form follows function. It may be distasteful to endorse a terrorist organisation as a model worth emulating, but it is a fact that whereas Western defence forces have been reluctant to breakdown stovepipes and to embrace organisational adaptability, Hizb'allah has endured, even prospered, because of its willingness to do so. The message is clear, at least to Hizb'allah. Organisational adaptability leads to quicker, better decisions, which in turn underwrites success.

The RAAF does itself no favours by persisting with institutional practices that facilitate a divisive culture and that are inimical to adaptability. Control of the air, strike, ISR, and manoeuvre (airlift) will remain fundamental air roles for at least the next thirty years, but they are insufficient as signposts for a 21st century air force culture.

Air Force's senior leadership team must do better. Their objective must be to move the RAAF culture and, therefore, mindset, vigorously towards the 21st century warfare imperative of innate adaptability. Two measures with which they could kick-start the process readily present themselves. First, they must place far more emphasis on meritocracy, and far less on the nominal qualifications of age and seniority; and second, they must strive to maximise organisational flexibility by permanently experimenting with their force's disposition.

At an international conference ten years ago, the then-chief executive officer of General Electric, Jack Welch, memorably urged leaders and managers to 'go faster and faster. Hate bureaucracy with a passion. Hate it, beat it, don't let it be there!'⁹ As a means to that end, Welch insisted that organisations must systematically weed out their poorest performers.

In practice, this means placing the best people in the most important jobs without delay, because it is only by exploiting the available talent to the maximum extent that an organisation will make good decisions faster than its opposition. 'Best people' is defined by a range of qualities, including background, education, experience, leadership, and intelligence. It is not defined by seniority and age, one way or the other. It defies logic that an individual can become prime minister of Great Britain at the age of 24 (William Pitt the younger), prime minister of Australia at 37 (John Watson), or president of the United States at 42 (Theodore Roosevelt), yet needs to be in his (only men need apply) fifties to become chief of an advanced defence service. On the other side of that coin, at the age of 66 – a year older than the common retirement age – in 1940, Winston Churchill was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Having placed the best people in the most important jobs strictly on the basis of merit, the organisation must then place strategic decision-making authority firmly in their hands. They must be given the highest quality information and advice available, as soon as is humanly possible, and they must be divested of every skerrick of trivia, so that they can apply themselves fully to the strategic issues – to the

issues that matter, to the issues that win. Those issues will change continually, sometimes drastically. Today's potentially strategic challenge might be deployed military operations, tomorrow's paying proper heed to workforce concerns, next week's attending to ceremonial responsibilities, and so on. The ability to identify shifting strategic challenges and priorities is one of the hallmarks of a successful organisation.

If adopted as the basis of a dynamic personnel management process, the philosophy outlined above would determine who does what, why, and how. It would establish the start-point for every other organisational practice and, therefore, for the institutional culture.

Turning to organisational arrangements, it is inconsistent with the need to achieve maximum adaptability, and with the innate flexibility of modern air weapons systems, to locate those systems within intellectually limiting role-labelled groups. Recent experience involving United States Air Force F-15 air superiority pilots is instructive here. When some of those pilots started to transition onto F-35 simulators, many were initially unimpressed, describing the F-35 as little better than its predecessor. The issue, though, was that those pilots were subconsciously constrained by the stovepipe mentality of their 'air superiority' background, and were trying to operate the enormously adaptable F-35 as though it were the far less flexible F-15. It was only after they were told that they had to fundamentally change their mindset that they began to comprehend the new system's possibilities. The lesson has far broader implications for organisational arrangements.

Basic roles such as control of the air, strike, ISR, and manoeuvre plainly will continue to be important, but it is self-limiting to permit traditional behaviour to stifle potentially better, or more, or different, or unexpected, etc, ways of doing things, and of exploiting assets. Like the USAF's F-15 pilots, an organisation that is set in its thinking is less likely to adapt to the circumstances than one that is not. The contrast with Hizb'allah's intuitive acceptance of adaptability as a key to success in 21st century combat is striking.

It follows that the RAAF should disband the FEGs and identify squadrons simply by their numbers. FEG commanders (one-stars) should be relocated to Headquarters Joint Operations Command to work for the Joint Force Air Component Commander, not as role specialists, but as wide-ranging, intellectually adventurous, strategic advisers. None should be specifically responsible for any one air power capability; all should be responsible for generating experimentation, innovation, and adaptability.

A vital element of the remit for such a group would be to prevent repetitions of the inexcusable planning failures (that is, intellectual and cultural failures) that have characterised the West's wars in the Middle East and Central Asia in the past decade. Given the immense resources that Western governments have poured into those campaigns – thousands of lives lost, trillions of dollars spent – taxpayers are entitled to ask blunt questions. Why, for example, did the vast numbers of officers employed as strategic planners by assorted Western defence forces fail so comprehensively to anticipate contingencies such as Improvised Explosive Devices, the insistent demand for 24/7 ISR, and the need for specialised counter-insurgency air force wings?¹⁰ Why did they fail so comprehensively to understand the culture of their enemies? And so on.

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Meeting the challenge of how best to shape organisational culture is so important that a concluding observation on the topic as it relates to the broader Australian Defence Force, and not just the RAAF, is warranted.

Two factors have historically impeded the degree of organisational change implicit in the 21st century warfare imperative of adaptability. First, defence forces have tended to develop through evolution, not revolution. For example, in 1940, the British and French armies grossly misused their relatively new tanks because they insisted on absorbing them into the infantry and cavalry, instead of creating new tank-centred formations, as the Germans had done. Tribalism was stronger than a powerful technological breakthrough, precisely as it was sixty-eight years later with the F-15 pilots who couldn't understand the F-35.

And second, the military mindset is notoriously hard to change. The aphorism that generals prepare for the next war by studying the last one says more about tradition and single-service cultures than it does about the intellectual capacity of military officers. An organisation arranged by single services inevitably imposes limits on innovative thinking.

A revealing illustration of this emotional and organisational barrier can be seen in the missions the single services tend to define for themselves. Armies, for example, almost invariably list their mission as being simply to win the land battle. While winning land battles historically has indeed been the main activity of armies, in itself it need not represent a desired effect; and nor does it define the only significant effect we might reasonably expect an advanced land force to deliver. Thus, armies have asserted sea denial (Turkish gun batteries dominating the Dardanelles in March 1915); they have won control of the air (allied troops capturing Luftwaffe airfields in France following the D-Day landings in 1944; Viet Minh artillery dominating the airfield at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; Ariel Sharon's armoured columns smashing through the Egyptians' ground-based air defence system along the Suez Canal in 1973); and so on. There are so many other cases that the point should be self-evident, but it is so important that it does need to be emphatically made. Navies and air forces similarly tend to couch their missions in strictly environmental terms. The attitudes that this kind of thinking represents constitute a formidable barrier to intellectual flexibility.

There are good reasons why the evolution of defence forces has thus far taken place within the distinct environments of land, sea and air. Even now when the influence of information operations and the capacity to act with speed and precision are becoming more evenly balanced across armies, navies and air forces, there are still apparently well-founded arguments in favour of the long-standing organisational arrangement. Some forty years down the track, Canada's ill-considered decision to peremptorily combine its three services is still used by guardians of the old order to 'prove' the danger of ignoring history.

It is unquestionably the case that the social compact within a professional, all-volunteer defence force is unique, and that an individual's readiness to risk his or her life can be related to their identification with their service and unit, as well as to their commitment to their comrades. Nevertheless, as J.F.C. Fuller once noted, the fighting power of a defence force lies in the first instance in its organisation. It could be a mistake of the first order if tradition alone were allowed to stand in the way of any reform which promised significantly enhanced performance.

If adaptability is to be genuinely embraced as an essential warfighting characteristic, it may be intellectually unsustainable for defence forces to retain operational structures based largely on service-related equipment, as is presently the case. Taking that observation a step further, we might conclude that if we started today with the proverbial clean sheet of paper to shape a defence force for the 21st century, we would not end up with an army, a navy and an air force as we now know them. Perhaps the most salutary observation here is that the main obstacle to intellectual reform within defence forces is neither operational nor technological, but cultural.

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¹ See the *Winograd Commission Final Report*, Jerusalem, January 30, 2008.

² 'Anaconda: Object Lesson in Poor Planning or Triumph of Improvisation?' in *InsideDefense.com*, August 12, 2004; Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda*, Berkley Books, Berkley, 2005; and Rebecca Grant, 'The Clash About CAS', in *Air Force Magazine*, January 2003.

³ Patrick Walters, 'Hovering tensions', in *The Australian*, April 30, 2009.

⁴ The RAAF has six FEGs: Air Combat Group; Air Lift Group; Aerospace Operational Support Group; Combat Support Group; Surveillance and Response Group; and Air Force Training Group.

⁵ See Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, London, Little, Brown, 2009.

⁶ See 'Adaptive Army' at <http://www.army.gov.au/> accessed 24 June 2009.

⁷ Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 236-7.

⁸ For more detail on the concept of 'shaping' and 'detering', see Alan Stephens and Nicola Baker, *Making Sense of War: Strategy for the 21st Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 101-108.

⁹ Quoted in *AsiaWeek*, 15 October 1999.

¹⁰ Crude, cheap improvised explosive devices have been the single biggest killer of allied troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, accounting for some 70% of all casualties. When the ADF joined the second US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 it had little comprehension of the threat posed by IEDs. Three years later in 2006, a counter-IED task force was (belatedly) established with seven staff; by 2009 the number had risen to 28, supported by hundreds of other ADF personnel and Defence scientific staff. According to the task force's commander, Australia's military had to learn new ways of conducting operations and evolve new training methods to deal with these primitive weapons. See Patrick Walters, 'Iraq experience helps stem the growth of evil flowers in Afghanistan', in *The Australian*, 1 August 2009; and Caitlin Harrington, 'US considers new counter-insurgency air wing' in *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 29 July 2009, p. 6.