

Baby Killers to Legitimacy – Towards East Timor

I served in the Army for some twenty confusing years

I joined the army in 1977, it was just after the end of the Vietnam War,

The immediate post World War II period was a time of reordering of the world.

After the war the US pursued an anti-colonial agenda even against some of its former allies. This was very effective as most of the countries who had fought the Second world War were either broke and/or owed the US money. The European Empires faced insurgent nationalists throughout the world. Also Notions of European superiority had been shattered by the early victories of the Japanese who fostered the nascent nationalist sentiments of the occupied populations. Decolonization had led to many Non-European Independent self governing states especially in Australia's part of the world.

Also the world had also recently been confronted with images of the NAZI Death Camps and was grappling with the implications where racially based policies could lead to. There had been the Nuremberg Trials which developed many of the concepts which found their way into the International Humanitarian Law, which reflected "Universal Human Rights" and which led to the civil rights movement.

Vietnam and its aftermath

For the army post Vietnam was a period of significant confusion. In Vietnam this new approach to war had become a "police action" and the "Winning Hearts and Minds". It was no longer acceptable to deploy maximum force and/or to win by "Genocide" or extermination. Genocide was a term coined to describe what happened to the Armenians in Turkey but recently brought to public consciousness by the Extermination Camps of World War II. The Me Lai Massacre had soured much of the general population on its soldiers with soldiers being dubbed "Baby Killers" by left leaning intelligentsia with a general anti-war sentiment holding sway.

In this environment I joined the Army Reserve.

The Army I joined was unsure of its direction. The Cold War was still going and both sides watched each other warily and had large mass armies at varying degrees of readiness. For the Cold War was in large measure an armed peace, a war of competitive preparation for war. The Army in those days there was also a clear divide between Reservists and Regulars. In part this was professional jealousy between the two Army Tribes. Australia also had started the World War II with a large Militia or part-time Army and a very small Permanent Force. The Regular Army as we know it today was not formed until 1948 and virtually all of the senior commanders during World War II were former Militia officers. The new Regular Army was determined to ensure that its officers would lead the post World War II army and so did not deploy Army Reserve Units to Korea or Vietnam to in part to deny senior Reserve officers the combat experience needed for effective higher command.

The army took a while to overcome its shock from the Vietnam War. The resulting reflection on what had happened led to a focus on "Legitimacy" and the Defence of Australia doctrine. In politics there is a saying is "perception is reality." The first question the army set out to answer was "When was it permissible to fight a war" where they looked back at aspects of the "Just War Theory" and how do we ensure in a democracy that soldiers and their operations or wars have public support and backing.

The Army and the Australian people worked together to bury the demons of the Vietnam War and there was a coming home parade for Vietnam Veterans in October of 1987.

https://www.auspsa.org.au/sites/default/files/welcome_home_nicholas_bromfield.pdf

Before we have the East Timor operation and during my period of service we had the First Gulf War. The question of whether to fight was answered by reference to what became known as the Powell Doctrine which was outlined in the lead up to the First Gulf War. Australia's considerations are outlined in the biography of the Prime Minister at the time Bob Hawke with comments by his principle advisor at the time Hugh White.

“By mid-November Hawke realized war was inevitable. He believed that for three reasons, Australia had to take part. First it was unacceptable for a country, unprovoked, to invade another. Second, he, like many other leaders around the world, fervently wanted to support the UN in its renaissance as an international force for justice and stability. Third was his support for the Australia-United States alliance. But of the three, the UN was by far the most important, for it was the hope of the future for a civilized world.

After Vietnam there had been a taboo on sending forces abroad. White added, ‘A lot of people, including a lot of people in government, just didn’t think it would happen; *we don’t go to war anymore.*’

“the ultimate strategic objective could be defined in very precise military term; there was a direct connection between the military operation and the strategic goal. “The big proviso.” White said, ‘was: Don’t cross the border, guys – because if you do then you end up governing Iraq, and Iraq is inherently ungovernable unless you’re prepared to operate in the same way as Saddam Hussein.’”

The answer to this was best expressed in the so called Powell Doctrine which stated that a list of questions all have to be answered affirmatively before military action is taken by the United States:

1. Is a vital national security interest threatened?
2. Do we have a clear attainable objective?
3. Have the risks and costs been fully and frankly analyzed?
4. Have all other non-violent policy means been fully exhausted?
5. Is there a plausible exit strategy to avoid endless entanglement?
6. Have the consequences of our action been fully considered?
7. Is the action supported by the American people?
8. Do we have genuine broad international support?

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/4100/the-powell-doctrines-enduring-relevance>

Even though the East Timor operation complied with the requirements of the Powell Doctrine as a Tactics Instructor I would have failed the planners if they came to me with the plan for the East Timor Invasion. Indeed I regarded the operation as legitimate and its successful execution as a validation of the doctrine. I had left the army in the late nineties and had joined the Labor Party just before I left the army as I didn’t think it appropriate to join a political party before this point. The reason for this is that I believe that the army like the public service should be apolitical and capable of serving the country regardless of who was in power with equal enthusiasm.

The reason I would have failed the successful East Timor Operation was more of my being a Reserve officer and seeing this through a Reserve lens. As a result of my period of full time service on the Headquarters of the 4th Brigade I had access to and was occasionally required to apply the 3rd Divisions Orders and Office Instructions. These instructions were almost heritage items by the time of my service having existed with little amendments since World War II. The 3rd Division was initially our higher headquarters and was disbanded during my period of full time service and the 4th Brigade subsequently displaced the 3rd Division as the senior formation in Victoria. I had therefore read about the so called “Blue book” the orders for mobilization which was the process for bringing the under-strength and under equipped 3rd Division from its current state to a point where it would be considered suitable for operations.

My reading of the 3rd Divisions Orders and Office Instructions was supplemented by my reading “The Patton Principles” which was a discussion about how General Patton operated in World War II. He frequently and consistently used the method of “Notice to Move” to ensure he would have his troops at the highest level of agility possible. The wisdom of this was born out when in less than 3 days his Corps was able to redeploy Northwards to crush the last great German Offensive of World War II commonly known as the Battle of the Bulge.

From my readings of the 3rd Divisions Orders and Office Instructions previously mentioned I knew that it was considered to take six to eighteen months for an Army Reserve formation to be brought up to strength and to conduct the necessary work up training to be considered combat ready (depending on the degree of difficulty of the task). As I watched the Regular forces who operate at a much higher level of preparedness being brought to fighting readiness I expected that in order to back fill these troops Army Reserve formations or at least units would be called out and bought up to a higher level of readiness. This never happened.

The process for effecting this had begun as part of the Defence of Australia Doctrine. Call out provisions had been passed through parliament. The process for this is a little instructive. Calls from the Defence Reserve Association which at this time I was the Victorian Treasurer had fallen on deaf ears. The old provisions were World war II provisions and took a criminal approach to employers who didn't release their staff. These would have worked in the days of universal conscription but with an all volunteer force they just worked as a barrier to employing reservists. In any case the parliamentarians were told that the parliamentary drafting office found it too difficult. Then Brigadier Greg Guard a Queens Council in civilian life did it for them.

The outworking of this was that for the last two years of my service I was considered deploy-able. To be considered deploy-able you must be: Physically fit and healthy, qualified in rank and trade, proficient and deemed competent for the year in personal weapon use and a volunteer for overseas service. I met these requirements and was considered deploy-able as an infantry Major.

In the army it is a key point of planning that you have a “Reserve” by which I do not mean the Army Reserve but rather an uncommitted combat capability of material size to be held against unexpected threats or opportunities. In any operation your soldiers are committed to achieve a specific task. Once they are committed they will need to be reorganized which takes time and may not in fact be possible before they can be used on any other task. Creating a reserve enable the commander to impact with fresh forces the operation if something unforeseen occurs. It is also standard doctrine that when a reserve is used the commander must do everything in his power to reconstitute one or else he has little reason for being.

It is for this reason that I fully expected that the Reserves would be called out at least when we decided to launch the operation if not before given that it would take some time for them to reach the required state of readiness to deploy. When that didn't happen I thought what happens next and turned my mind to the requirement of relief. With in effect all of our regular forces who were capable of being deployed actually deployed I wondered how long they could be kept on operational deployment especially in the tropics which are harsh of troops and equipment before they would start to seriously degrade. For the force deployed to Somalia this was considered to be three months. So you can see my dilemma. If we seriously expect to relieve our forces in East Timor in three months and the only available forces to relieve them are the Army Reserve and they take at best six months to be brought up to readiness then the troops required should have been mobilized three months ago.

I contacted my local Federal Member and primed him with a question "How long are the troops currently in East Timor expected to be there before they are relieved?" I explained to my local member that for Somalia this it was considered that three months was a long enough operational deployment as you would want. The answer to the question in parliament was stone walled but Defence Headquarters announced that it would be calling out elements of the Army Reserve after the question later that very afternoon.