

Regimental Life in the Cold War, 1980-89

Brigadier Allan A. Murray, CSM (Retd)

The Cold War was a hot war, it was just that no one fired the first shot or pushed the first button.

Major-General (Retd), The Honourable Justice Greg Garde, AO RFD
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This paper will present a picture of regimental life in the Cold War, particularly focussing on the Australian Army's contributions to the preparedness battle in the final decade, the post-Détente period.

The scope is:

A snapshot of the Australian Army in 1980 and what it did in the post-Détente period.

Comparing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces and Australia's Operational Deployment Force.

Australia's contribution to NATO and the nature of this service.

The legacy from this service.

Out of scope is discussion of the activities at the time of the Army's Special Forces. The method is experiential, then placing that in context based upon what we now know of the Cold War.

Definitions

Iron Curtain. The border between West Germany on one side and East Germany and Czechoslovakia on the other side.

Post-Détente period. The period from the inauguration of United States President, Ronald Reagan (January 1980), until the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989).

Preparedness. The combination of 'readiness' (how soon a force can deploy) and 'sustainability' (for how long it can be deployed).

Regimental life. Service within an Army unit.

A snapshot of the Australian Army in 1980

The Afghanistan invasion in 1979 by Soviet forces, acting upon the Brezhnev doctrine, was the latest proxy war of the Cold War, joining the conflicts in Korea, the Middle East, Vietnam and Angola. In response, United States President, Jimmy Carter, boycotted the Moscow Olympics. When his successor, Ronald Reagan, was inaugurated he immediately acted to end Détente.

Reagan's post-Détente agenda included the ending of Soviet influence in eastern Europe. This gave the West a new strategic mission, to further focus upon the preparedness of forces in western Europe to not only deter but defeat a Warsaw Pact invasion, including at its flanks (being Denmark / Norway and Greece / Turkey). The 'preparedness battle' intensified and the AUTUMN FORGE series of exercises became central to demonstrating and integrating preparedness.

This thinking carried across to Australia. Increasing preparedness was driving Army's structure. The Fraser Government response to Afghanistan included 3rd Task Force (soon to be brigade) becoming the high preparedness Operational Deployment Force in Townsville,

supported by a force-level Logistic Support Group drawn from 2nd Field Supply Battalion in Townsville and other assets across Australia. The author served with the Battalion in 1984-85.

This full-strength force was on 28 days' notice-to-move with a 'Ready Battalion Group' on 7 days' notice-to-move. The 1st Brigade (Mechanised) was identified as the follow-on force. It and 6th Brigade were on much lower levels of preparedness, 180 days' notice-to-move. The post-Vietnam War preparedness malaise was beginning to be addressed. During the 1980s was when this capability matured, especially through DP1 checks, short notice callouts and the annual Exercise SWIFT EAGLE.

Formal training was schizophrenic. Infantry minor tactics at the platoon- and company-level was focussed upon the jungle. Unit- and formation-level training was against a doctrinal enemy known as Musoria. The Musorians were based upon a Warsaw Pact force, but with a lot fewer heavy tanks, fortuitously. Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) Defence training was prominent.



1982. In NBC protective clothing. Source: The author

The experience pool of the Army was in decline with ever decreasing numbers of Vietnam War veterans. It was the period of the 'twenty years of peace' with few operational opportunities. There were some exceptions e.g. the short-lived Commonwealth Monitoring Force – Rhodesia (1979-80).

The Australian Army's contribution to the post-Détente period:

Hong Kong. Personnel and sub-unit exchanges with the Gurkha Field Force. Several personnel integrated into British SIGINT facility, eaves dropping on China.

Malaysia. As part of the Five Power Defence Agreements, Rifle Company Butterworth (approx. 130 personnel every 3-4 months) protected the base and aircraft. It was less about the Cold War with the Soviets and more about the last vestiges of the communist insurgency.

United Kingdom. Long-term and shorter personnel exchanges with British Army, e.g. since 1976, the LONG LOOK Exchange (approx. 70 pers p.a.).

West Germany. Personnel and sub-unit exchanges with NATO forces. Mainly via the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) but also United States and Canadian forces, e.g. Exercise NORTH STAR (a sub-unit p.a.). It was the front line of the Cold War and a great attractor for Australian military personnel.

The author's Cold War service in the United Kingdom and West Germany in 1986 was through the LONG LOOK Exchange.

United Nations (UN) type operations. Included the Multi-national Force & Observers – Sinai; the UN Interim Force in Lebanon; UN Truce Supervision Organisation (Golan Heights, southern Lebanon); and Korea. No more than 30 personnel p.a. Contributions to UN type operations were very minor and largely Middle East focussed.

Counter-espionage. Australia operated within the context of the Five Eyes Agreement. Vigilance and reporting were reinforced. From an Army perspective, the domestic threat focus was upon outlawed motorcycle gangs rather than Soviets.

Overall, the contributions are assessed as disparate, with no centre of gravity. A lesser contribution compared to that of the Australian Navy and Air Force. These deployments were not recognised as operational at the time by Australia. To this day, the official line is ... 'we trained and exercised with NATO forces, we didn't serve with NATO'. Until late last year, the Department of Defence had a similar view of Rifle Company Butterworth. This was changed by a 2023 decision of the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (DHAAT).



An Australian officer from 5/7th Battalion, RAR (Mechanised) in Malaysia with Rifle Company Butterworth. Source: Kon Iliadis

NATO and the preparedness battle

Making a difference on land in the post-Détente period was about NATO. NATO's preparedness battle with the Warsaw Pact will be looked at through threats, preparedness, force projection and interoperability.

Standing force. Nine Army Corps, armour heavy, were forward deployed in West Germany supported by two air armies, some were sustained by conscription. Strategic and tactical nuclear capable.



Armour heavy NATO forces in West Germany. Source: Kon Iliadis

Threats. Specifically, Warsaw Pact was the threat, but NATO also dealt with threats from the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) (for British Armed Forces) and the Red Army Faction (for United States military).

Mission. Defence of western Europe, defeat Warsaw Pact attack. Live 'Rules of Engagement'.

Preparedness. Readiness - very short notice, constant system of unit 'alerts', only need to deploy 50-80 km to be on the Iron Curtain. The United States Army had permanent observation posts at the Fulda gap and Hof corridor, within metres of the Iron Curtain.

Sustainability - strong force logistics to United Kingdom and United States, a reinforcement plan from United States, Canada and United Kingdom. Exercise REFORGER would move up to three divisions from continental United States to West Germany annually. Exercise LIONHEART 84 involved 131,600 personnel from the British Armed Forces exercising in West Germany, more than half had been brought in from the United Kingdom.

Force projection. Forces in United Kingdom at very short notice able to deploy quickly to flanks e.g. Norway, with strong NATO amphibious and naval forces. There was a large role for the Marines.

Interoperability. NATO standard. Army Corps from United Kingdom, United States, West Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark etc. AUTUMN FORGE series of exercises integrated collective training.

Australia followed many of the NATO standards, most notably in weapons calibres and the supply system. NSN = NATO stock number.

Australia's Operational Deployment Force, a Comparison

Was there a role with NATO? The Operational Deployment Force will be looked at using threats, preparedness, force projection and interoperability.

Standing force. 3,200 personnel brigade group, two light infantry battalions, airmobile with limited APC lift. Several hundred in the Logistic Support Group. Reinforced with third light infantry battalion in mid-1980s, the parachute battalion group.

The Operational Deployment Force was reminiscent of the 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam.



1984. A light scales Operational Deployment Force. Source: The author

Threat. Doctrinal threat only, Musoria. No terrorist threat, other than when elements went to Rifle Company Butterworth.

Mission. From Defence of Australia to projection into island arc to north and east. Only training ‘Rules of Engagement’.

Preparedness. Readiness - short notice, the readiness culture developed rapidly and was an early strength.

Sustainability – Logistic Support Group was never truly exercised beyond callout, deployment and Combat Supplies (ammunition, food, fuels and water), the easier items to resupply. A lack of focus upon the broader supply requirement was a weakness.

Force projection. Air Force fleet (*Hercules, Caribou, Iroquois*) could project to island arc from Singapore to New Zealand. Deploying to Hong Kong, Korea, Afghanistan, the Middle east or even West Germany a real challenge, if not beyond capability, without substantial allied and civilian lift, and plenty of time.

There was a lot of training for regional services assisted and protected evacuations. This was valuable for Fiji, 1987.

Interoperability. A close country proficient, air mobile force of two or three light infantry battalions and some APCs.

It is assessed the Operational Deployment Force and NATO were a lot like water and oil. The Australian 1st Brigade a better fit with NATO, but at 180 days’ notice-to-move and equipped only with *Leopard 1* light tanks, questionable.

So how else could Australia meaningfully contribute to the front line of the Cold War in the 1980s?

Australian service in the preparedness battle with NATO

Major-General John Cantwell stated in his book, *Exit Wounds ...*

... “I was offered the job of my dreams – seconded to the British Army commanding a tank squadron in West Germany, facing off against the Soviet forces across the border. After years of peace, this was what I yearned for, to go to a place where there was a real threat ... I ... left for Europe at the end of 1988.”

The types of service were as follow:

Long-term exchange. Posted to headquarters or unit in West Germany or assigned to NATO within United Kingdom e.g. John Cantwell (armoured exchange) and David Hurley (with the Irish Guards). David Hurley spoke about the ‘big army experience’.

LONG LOOK Exchange. Short-term (3-4 months), to headquarters or unit in West Germany or assigned to NATO within United Kingdom.

Exercise NORTH STAR. A month-long sub-unit exchange, mechanised focussed. Kon Iliadis with 5/7th Battalion, RAR (Mechanised) judged the exercise as the finest mechanised experience of his career, albeit brief.



Australian soldiers on Exercise NORTH STAR briefed by a British Army officer. Source: Kon Iliadis

Deployed from the United Kingdom. With a NATO element in United Kingdom and deployed as roundout or reinforcement to West Germany. The author deployed to West Germany as a reinforcement to command an ammunition supply platoon of British 1st Armoured Division. Duntroon classmate, Michael Tucker, serving with the Guards, nearly froze in his jungle greens on the first night of a short-notice deployment to Norway.

Visitor. Whilst undertaking individual training or peacetime role in United Kingdom, visit NATO forces in West Germany. Roger Emmerson, on the Long Petroleum Course, visited BAOR and patrolled along the border with East Germany.

Other. Staff Cadets organising attachments for their Christmas leave, Prince of Wales Award Scheme.

Brigadier Justin Kelly (Retd), quoted by John Blaxland, reflected on the BAOR in the mid-1980s ...

... “When I got to work with NATO armies I was stunned by the complexity of the battle of which they were a part – anti-tank guided weapons, helicopters, masses of armour and the power of self-propelled artillery.”

The author’s observations of the logistic task and NBCD preparedness support this. Australia’s Operational Deployment Force trained hard at warfighting, but NATO was a step-up from anything occurring in Australia, which lacked at the time nuclear weapons, chemical and biological weapons, heavy long-range bombers, attack helicopters, 120-millimetre gun tanks and self-propelled artillery, to name a few.

Nature of Service with NATO

Perhaps 1,200 Australian Army personnel served with NATO in the decade, none of it officially recognised as operational service. The Department of Defence view is that it was peacetime service, Australians with NATO only ... 'trained and exercised'. It was a bit more:

Counter-espionage. Constantly on alert to Communist espionage.

Protective security against terrorist organisations. Individual security screening, personal and base protective measures (such as car searches and minimizing wearing of uniform in public), contingency rehearsals, regular changes to routines and ensuring information security.

Border patrols. Operations along the border with East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Alerts. Regular 'Alerts' to test unit readiness, known as 'active edge' call outs.

Demonstrating preparedness. Intensive divisional- and corps-level demonstrations of the ability to defeat a Warsaw Pact invasion through West Germany without early resort to nuclear weapons.



BAOR soldiers under command of the author practice sustainment. Source: The author

Rehearsals. On the ground where the battle was to be fought e.g. the 'counter-stroke' experimentation of the Bagnell Initiatives in the early 1980s, and in 1986 new concepts for a less static defence, more defence in depth, strong armoured reserves and airborne landings

Reinforcement. From the United Kingdom to West Germany or Exercise REFORGER from the United States.

All conducted against a specific threat. These were not military activities occurring back in peacetime Australia against a doctrinal enemy.

Over a 50-day period, the author participated in BAOR refresher training in England; a reinforcement activity (flying England to West Germany); demonstrated preparedness on an activity (Exercise ETERNAL TRIANGLE 86) where specific tactical rehearsals were undertaken; and complied throughout with protective security measures. The terrorist threat was taken very seriously. As was the NBC threat.

The author had a wonderful and invigorating experience, serving with an alliance force, under threat from Soviet NBC weapons, Warsaw Pact massed tank formations and the IRA. All only a short distance from the East German border.

A recent DHAAT inquiry into Rifle Company Butterworth service proffers a pathway to an alternate to the current Department of Defence interpretation of the 1993 cabinet endorsed definitions that are used to classify nature of service. According to the DHAAT, peacetime service cannot include hazards or risks from a hostile force that justify the application of force and may result in combat- or mission-related casualties. These conditions were present in western Europe, the author's assessment of service in western Europe in the post-Détente period utilising this pathway leads to a conclusion that it may not be peacetime service.

Legacy

This experience did provide a solid foundation for the Australian Army's transition to warfighting in the 1990s and 2000s – Gulf War, Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda and East Timor. These being:

Operationally experienced leadership. John Cantwell went on to serve in the Gulf War, David Hurley in Somalia, Kon Iliadis in Cambodia and Michael Tucker in East Timor.

Big army experience. Divisions and Corps, preparedness, staff processes on large headquarters, complex logistics. David Hurley spoke in an article on his service with the Irish Guards about the broadening experience of seeing many battalions and brigades in the field.

Dealing with multiple threats. Conventional, terrorist, air, nuclear.

Manoeuvre experience. Mechanised forces, air integration, complex support weapons e.g. attack helicopters.

Interoperability (or working in coalitions). With British Armed Forces, United States military, Canadians and NATO staff processes.

Significantly, the experience with high preparedness afforded these Australians was brought back to Australia and integrated throughout the 1980s and 90s improving the approach to – medical standards, individual readiness, no-notice callouts, growth of Army Aviation, mechanised manoeuvre and littoral operations.

The Operational Deployment Force should not be forgotten. After nearly two decades of Exercise SWIFT EAGLE, it had at hand the basis of the plan to secure Dili, East Timor in 1999. And Rifle Company Butterworth delivered on its mission. The continuous preparation and rotation of sub-units on deployment set-up the Army for the period 2000-2015.

Conclusion

The post-Détente period of the Cold War was an important interregnum. Taking the Australian Army out of the post-Vietnam preparedness malaise and into a mindset of preparedness, gained from operational-like experiences, especially in western Europe. These nine years prepared the Army for the transition to warfighting in the 1990s and 2000s.

Sources

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