

The Challenge of Innovation in the Australian Army

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In early 2009, I sat at a makeshift table at a US base in Logar province, 60 kilometres South of Kabul, analysing the course of a battle that had occurred nearby the day before. Across from me, a US Special Forces Captain in his late twenties explained everything that had gone wrong. He was not short of examples. Infantry soldiers had refused to engage insurgents because they were unsure of new rules of engagement and concerned about civilian casualties. A low flying bomber had nearly collided with a patrolling drone. Chain of command on the ground had been confused and his team had been committed to an unnecessary assault. A team member had been shot in the head manoeuvring for a fire position on a rooftop. An Apache pilot had risked his life and machine to land on the position, evict his co-pilot, and perform the medevac. The soldier died during the ten-minute flight. The professionalism of a brigade newly rotated into theatre was being questioned and tensions were high. When the Captain finished speaking, the commanding Colonel leant back and drawled “There’s only two ways armies ever learn: trauma and repetition”.

The Australian Army is about to enter a new phase of both trauma and learning. Across the globe, austerity is the new black. In the United States, a bipartisan presidential fiscal commission has recommended the Pentagon cut US\$1 trillion in spending (twice the current annual budget) over the next decade. The United Kingdom’s overall defence budget will reduce by 8 percent, 17,000 uniformed and 25,000 civilian positions will be cut, and the army will lose one in six of its deployable brigades. France has frozen all defence spending at current levels. These three countries between them account for 50 percent of global defence spending—which explains why annual global military expenditure is at its lowest rate of growth since 2001.¹ Australia too has been forced to reduce its defence budget, despite weathering the global financial crisis better than most. The Australian Army will feel much of the fiscal pressure in the Australian Defence Force. The Defence White Paper 2009 was long on maritime and aviation capabilities and short on ground forces.² After a decade of largesse spurred on by East

¹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), ‘Background Paper on SIPRI Military Expenditure Data’, 11 April 2011, <www.sipri.org> [Accessed 27 April 2011], p. 1.

² Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, May 2009).

Timor and the Howard Government, the Australian Army will no longer be the force of choice for government and will be expected to do more with less.

For the next decade, the critical challenge for the Australian Army will be incubating innovation. There are two components essential to fostering innovation and the Australian Army is duly handicapped in both. The first is an Army culture which values smart ideas and critical thinking. The second is the identification, retention, and mentoring of talented people: particularly junior officers. Both of these have been targeted under the Adaptive Army initiative, aiming to make the Australian Army “an organisation that is constantly on the move, ready to transform itself, ready to take new ideas”.³ Yet, though the Australian Army has talked adaptation extensively, there have been few new ideas. Innovation is the critical enabler that will allow the Australian Army to adapt for the next decade and prepare itself for the conflicts of an uncertain strategic future.

There are plenty of excellent soldiers and officers in Australian Army ranks, yet the market for new military ideas is anaemic. For an organisation that prides itself on being the best small army in the world, the Australian Army has generated very few innovative contributions to warfare in the forty years since Vietnam. Beyond the work of David Killcullen it is difficult to name anything written by a serving Australian Army soldier that has contributed a significant idea to the profession of arms. In professional military forums and journals, Australian Army personnel are conspicuous by their absence: largely content to leave innovative military thinking to colleagues elsewhere.

Military ideas proliferate slowly in the Australian Army. The current capstone doctrine of the Australian Army, *Adaptive Campaigning: Future Land Operating Concept*, took three years and twenty-two versions to progress from concept to a cleared doctrine.⁴ It has been derided as difficult to teach, understand, and apply.⁵ In launching Adaptive Army, the Chief of Army heralded it as the first change to Army command and control in thirty-five years: neglecting to explain why Army headquarters structures had not been re-examined since the Vietnam War.⁶ International military ideas proliferate slowly to the Australian Army, too. Distributed operations was developed in the US Marine Corps in 2003, yet only emerged in Australian army doctrine six years later. Last year, whilst the US military was debating the demise of

³ Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, 2010 Chief of Army Exercise Opening Address, Brisbane, 15 November 2010.

⁴ The current Australian Army capstone doctrine *Adaptive Campaigning 09: Future Land Operating Concept* was approved largely by the Chief of Army's Senior Advisory Committee on 1 December 2006 and published in doctrinal form in September 2009.

⁵ LTCOL Jason Thomas, 'Adaptive Campaigning: Is It Adaptive Enough?', *Australian Army Journal* vol. VII, no. 1 (Autumn 2010), p. 102.

⁶ Chief of Army, *Adaptive Army Speech*, 27 August 2008, <www.army.gov.au/Adaptive_Army.asp> [Accessed 13 February 2011].

counterinsurgency theory⁷, Australian military theorists held their first Chief of Defence Force conference analysing its fundamentals. Though the Australian Army sprouts rhetoric about an “institutional culture of adaptation”⁸, the good ideas to underpin that have thus far seemed missing.

Armies do not innovate unless they have systems expressly designed to stimulate new ideas, incubate the best ones, and communicate them across the organisation. The Australian Army could learn much from the way the US Marine Corps has provided a market for military ideas by providing incentives for marines to publish their good ideas. The USMC has long been a budgetary stepchild to the US Navy, forced to overcome limited funding by incubating innovation amongst its ranks. Every USMC publication is focused on warriors writing clearly and simply about good ideas for other warriors. By contrast, Australian Army warriors speak well but rarely write their good ideas down.⁹ Though excellent work has been done in increasing the relevance and accessibility of publications like the *Australian Army Journal*, more basic steps are required. The most potent Army weapon for communicating is the fortnightly *Army—The Soldiers Newspaper*—read by every single soldier and officer on a fortnightly basis. Glance through its pages and you will see soldiers writing about pay, allowances, berets and medals. Rarely is there professional debate in *Army* pages about the army's core task: fighting and winning the land battle. Until the *Army Newspaper* is filled with letters and articles from soldiers and officers promoting new ideas and suggesting improvements, the Australian Army will remain derivative rather than adaptive.¹⁰ Until smart military thinking and writing becomes an organisational obsession, and soldiers and officers alike are assessed on their ability to think of new ideas and communicate them, the Australian Army will remain a backwater for military innovation.

Performance assessment tells us a lot about the second challenge for the Australian Army: finding, retaining, and mentoring talent. In the past decade, there has been an information and knowledge revolution, yet the performance appraisal report of the Australian Army has barely evolved. Armies often have problems in identifying talent within their ranks because many military performance reports and service records provide less insight than a commander could glean by checking an officer's Facebook or LinkedIn profile.¹¹ Even when career managers can spot talent within the

⁷ Colonel Gian Gentile, ‘Time for the Deconstruction of Field Manual 3-24’, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, issue 58 (3rd Quarter 2010), pp. 116-7.

⁸ Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, ‘The Adaptive Army Initiative’, *Australian Army Journal*, vol. VI, no. 3 (2009).

⁹ Colonel John Hutcheson, ‘The Adaptive Officer: Think, Communicate, and Influence’, *Australian Army Journal*, vol. VI, no. 2 (2009).

¹⁰ The phrase is from Michael Evans, ‘The Closing of the Australian Military Mind: The ADF and Operational Art’, *Security Challenges*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 105-31.

¹¹ For more on this see Wardynski, Lyle, and Colarusso, *Toward a US Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College, May 2010).

ranks they have few mechanisms to recognise or develop it. There are few avenues to fast track stellar performers and the promotion system has little tolerance for officers to deviate from the norm in their career stream. The Australian Army has no formal system to identify and mentor the generals of tomorrow whilst they are junior officers. Other militaries have formal programs to identify future strategic leaders early, and both broaden and accelerate their military professional education whilst they are Captains and Majors.¹² In this way, promising strategists and future Army Chiefs are identified at the earliest possible point and mentored continuously to ensure they stay in the service until staff college and beyond. The Australian Army relies purely on luck, a sense of duty, and a dearth of better career options to keep its junior officers engaged until they reach staff college and can then be selected for promotion and mentoring.

Militaries face particularly problems in retaining talented junior officers. Tim Kane describes that "the military's problem is a deeply anti-entrepreneurial personnel structure" rather than a "cutting-edge meritocracy".¹³ In the Australian Army's industrial age human resources system, promotion is steam driven and seniority based. Officers are promoted at virtually the same rate during the first fifteen years of their military career regardless of actual performance—there is little incentive for any of them to incur risk by innovating. Reward is based on length of service rather than knowledge, intelligence, or innovation. Many of the Australian Army's highest performing junior leaders will choose the civilian world rather than remaining paralysed in successive staff and administrative jobs below those who will move neither up nor out. Just as other institutions have adapted their antiquated promotion systems to face dwindling recruitment, the Australian Army will need to similarly modernise its anti-meritocratic promotion system. It will be a question of when, not if, should the Australian Army wish to avoid the trauma of an exodus of talented and experienced officers.

Incubating innovation will become increasingly difficult as the Australian Army, like others around the globe, draws down from conflict after a decade of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates spoke recently of the inherent tensions in returning an Army from the field to barracks life:

In theater, junior leaders are given extraordinary opportunities to be innovative, take risks, and be responsible and recognized for the consequences. The opposite is too often true in the rear-echelon headquarters and stateside bureaucracies in which so many of our mid-level officers are warehoused. Men and women in the prime of their professional lives, who may have been responsible for the lives of scores or hundreds of

¹² The US Military runs a highly selective Joint Chiefs of Staff/Office of the Secretary of Defence Internship Program that lasts two years and rotates chosen junior officers through a well regarded post graduate course at a civilian university as well as postings in strategy based jobs.

¹³ Tim Kane, 'Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving', *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2011, pp. 80-5.

troops ... may find themselves in a cube all day re-formatting power point slides ... The consequences of this terrify me.¹⁴

For the Australian Army too, Afghanistan and Iraq have been “captains’ wars” where junior officers have led the battles and owned the battlespace. Gates’ solution to the problem of reintegrating such warriors into the dreary desk jobs of a budget stricken army is to develop officers who have “full-spectrum thinking”, honed by a culture of innovation and a diversity of military and non-military education and experience. That diversity of experience and education is becoming harder to come by. The Defence Assisted Study Scheme that facilitated graduate study, often at civilian universities, has been significantly cut since 2009. The Chief of Army Scholarship scheme has become a Gallipoli historical excursion program where before it provided an opportunity for high performers to be immersed for a sabbatical year in a civilian university or company. The Australian Army has often been focused on current operations overseas and been “too busy to learn”¹⁵ beyond mandatory career courses. The message has been getting progressively louder and clearer: innovative ideas do not matter.

Somewhat ironically, the Australian Army’s central leadership philosophy, mission command, is based entirely on innovation. Mission command requires soldiers and officers to maintain a healthy scepticism of their original orders from a superior and innovate if the circumstances have changed. The fundamental skill in mission command is the ability to continuously question assumptions, existing structures, and be constantly critical of existing plans. There can be no improvement without criticism. It is a lack of meaningful criticism in almost all professional debate within the Australian Army that is most stifling innovation.

There should be arguments and critical analysis, in these pages and elsewhere, about what kind of fighting the Australian Army will need to do in the next decade. Much critical thinking will be needed to determine how the Australian Army can intelligently prepare for multiple strategic possibilities with a budget-limited force structure. More than any other factor, the Australian Army’s ability to successfully innovate will be the determinant of success or failure. An innovative culture within the Australian Army and systems to retain and train the Army’s smartest officers will provide leaders ready to face an uncertain strategic future and fight foes not yet identified. Fostering that innovation will be the most difficult task the new Chief of Army faces. As Sir Basil Liddel Hart noted, the only thing more difficult than getting a new idea into a military mind is getting the old one out.

¹⁴ US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Speech to Corps of Cadets, West Point, New York, 25 February 2011.

¹⁵ Major General Robert H. Scales, ‘Too Busy to Learn’, *Proceedings Magazine*, vol. 136/2/1284 (February 2010).

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