

House of Representatives, Monday 16 June 1997

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr SINCLAIR (New England)(1.03 p.m.) —On behalf of the parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report on the visit of the Defence Subcommittee to Exercise Tandem Thrust 1997 on 12 to 14 March 1997, together with the minutes of proceedings, and move that the report be printed.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr SINCLAIR —Exercise Tandem Thrust was conducted in March this year. It was a combined field training exercise off the Queensland coast and in the Shoalwater Bay training area, near Rockhampton. Unlike many previous major defence exercises hosted by the ADF which involved many nations, Exercise Tandem Thrust involved only the Australian and United States forces.

There was direct participation by over 21,000 US personnel, almost 6,000 members of the Australian Defence Force, 43 naval vessels and over 200 aircraft. The exercise was the first truly combined, all-environment, strategic level activity conducted between the forces of the two nations since World War II. That is, it provided the opportunity for senior Australian defence staff to participate in strategic planning on an equal basis, rather than taking a role subordinate to a United States command structure.

The exercise itself was an important outcome of the AUSMIN talks held in July last year with the Joint Security Declaration, also known as the Sydney Statement, setting down Tandem Thrust as a major step towards ADF/US Pacific command vision for future combined operations.

The committee was pleased to meet members of the Defence Force and have an opportunity to visit the exercise. One of the key outcomes was to test our military interoperability with the United States. In doing so, one of the significant concerns identified was that the ADF currently lags the US military in the fields of communication and information systems. The subcommittee was shown a number of innovative software applications and communications systems used in the field by the ADF. Of themselves, these were encouraging and some particularly so. However, as the US military aggressively develops its capabilities, we certainly need to be aware that as we fall behind, our ability to maintain contact within elements of the Australian Defence Force is more limited than it should be. I commend close attention to this field, as I believe that this area should be afforded priority in ADF force development.

The subcommittee also observed other aspects of the exercise which were a source of some concern. Prime amongst these was the degree to which, in the presence of Cyclone Justin, it was not possible to proceed with the amphibious landing. The marines, on the other hand, were able to proceed with their landing because they had a helicopter capability which ensured that, although the seas were such and the weather was such, they were able to proceed on a basis which allowed them to bring their men ashore and to proceed with the amphibious part of the landing. In that respect, I am concerned about the intention of the navy to acquire the Kaman Seasprite. It seems to me we would have been far better to have proceeded with more Seahawks, even though they might have been fewer in number, to maintain a similarity to that of the Black Hawk, and to ensure that we had a greater defence capability.

Environmentally, a lot happened there and I would like to commend those who ensured that the exercise was conducted in a way that those who raised concerns before the exercise about the environmental consequences could feel quite satisfied that the environmental aspect was well and truly recognised by the commander of the exercise control group, Rear Admiral Kenneth Fisher of the United States Navy, and all participants.

The subcommittee's visit did provide an excellent opportunity for us to see the ADF operating in the field and to meet with individual personnel. My only regret was that so few members of the committee were able to participate.

I would like to pay particular credit to Wing Commander Paul Hyslop, who is the Defence attache attached to the Defence Subcommittee, for the work he has done in preparing this report and, of course, also to Jane Vincent, the secretary to the committee and to Eleanor Hull, who was on the subcommittee staff.

The report is a vehicle by which, hopefully, we might be able better to identify the relationship between the parliament and the Defence Force on future occasions and I certainly commend the concept of Tandem Thrust for future consideration, although I would hope that in the future Australia might take a more leading role in setting the course of the exercise, rather than have Australia virtually subordinate to the US Marines, as seemed to be the case in many instances on this occasion.

Mr TAYLOR —I would like to add a few comments to what the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair) indicated. I was part of the subcommittee visiting this exercise, and I would like to reinforce one or two points. Firstly, this is a very significant issue which I am sure will be addressed in the defence reform program which is under way at the direction of the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan)—a point which was included in the report—relating to interoperability and as a result, command control, computer operations and intelligence, which are so important in the future structure and operational viability of the Australian Defence Force. As the right honourable member has indicated and as is indicated in the report, when you look at what the ADF does in these areas in the field, as we saw in Tandem Thrust, it does look—I am reluctant to use the term second rate—somewhat mediocre when compared with high tech defence forces like those of the United States. We saw that with the Marine Corps, as was indicated, in the field. I think we need to do something about that. I am aware that things are happening in that area; nevertheless, it is an aspect of Australian Defence Force operations which needs some impetus. One would hope that, as a result of the reform program under way, that will be addressed.

Secondly, and again this is a point which relates to another element of the Defence Force which is being restructured at the moment, there is the restructuring of the army. The army, one might say, has become the poor cousin of the three services. There was a major review into the army into the next century, and there is a trial under way to correct the situation over time. We saw one reflection of that in the report; it talked about the forward support battalion concept. I have to say that, from our observation, it did not quite know what it had to do. That, of course, is one element of addressing the problem for the army in the future. We have had briefings since, and perhaps our impressions are not altogether accurate. Nevertheless, I think something has to be done, particularly for the army to become a more mobile and a more effective service within the Australian Defence Force environment.

I enjoyed the visit. I suppose my big disappointment—putting on my old naval cap—was when we went out to the carrier group in the carrier on board delivery aircraft and, after three attempts, we did not take the wire because of the weather. That was disappointing for me and I am sure it was disappointing for my colleagues. Nevertheless, we saw total operational cooperation between our defence forces; they can only go from strength to strength. I endorse everything that is reflected in the report. Once again, I hope that the defence reform program over the next year or so repeats the benefits that are indicated at the moment.

Mr SINCLAIR (New England) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl) —In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting Monday and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.