SPECIAL REPORT

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The final straw

Are our defence forces overstretched?

by Mark Thomson

Are our defence forces overstretched? Have we reached the point where the scale and diversity of Australian Defence Force (ADF) deployments are no longer sustainable? Are overseas deployments compromising the maintenance and development of our defence capabilities? Is too heavy a burden being placed on the men and women of the ADF by multiple deployments?[1] With concurrent operations ongoing in Iraq, Afghanistan, Timor Leste and Solomon Islands, coupled with shorter missions to Fiji and Tonga last year, it's tempting to conclude that the answers to all these questions must be yes.

But what do the numbers say? We currently have around 3,222 personnel deployed

Table 1: Current ADF international deployments

Deployment	Current composition	Personnel
Iraq (late 2002–present)	Task Force HQ (70) Security Detachment Baghdad (110) Overwatch Battle Group Dhi Qar (520) Army Training Team Tallil (30) Force Level Logistics (110) Multinational Force HQ (90) 2 x C-130 Transport Aircraft (140) 2 x AP-3C Patrol Aircraft (170) 1 Anzac Frigate (190)	1,450
Timor Leste (September 1999–present)	Task Force HQ ANZAC Battle Group	1,100
Afghanistan (October 2001–late 2002) (2006–present)	National Command Element (30) Liaison Officers (20) Reconstruction Task Force (370) National Logistics (20) UN Office (4)	480*
Solomon Islands (July 2003–present)	Task Force HQ Infantry Company Group	140
Other operations	Sinai Peninsula, Egypt (25) Sudan (15) UN Truce Supervision, Middle East (12)	52
Total		**3,222**

Source: www.defence.gov.au (accessed early April 2007)
Note: Current composition figures are not comprehensive and do not add to total for Iraq and Afghanistan.
*Growing to around 950 by mid-2007 including a Special Forces Task Group (300) and RAAF air surveillance radar capability (70).

internationally. That includes around 1,450 in Iraq, 1,100 in Timor Leste and 480 in Afghanistan. Table 1 details current ADF international deployments. A further 300 ADF personnel are engaged in the long-established peacetime task of border protection in and round our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

While a total of 3,222 personnel deployed overseas represents an increase on the level maintained in recent years, it's about the same as arose from 2000 to 2003 and less than half the peak of 6,500 reached during the INTERFET deployment in late 1999 and early 2000, see Figure 1.

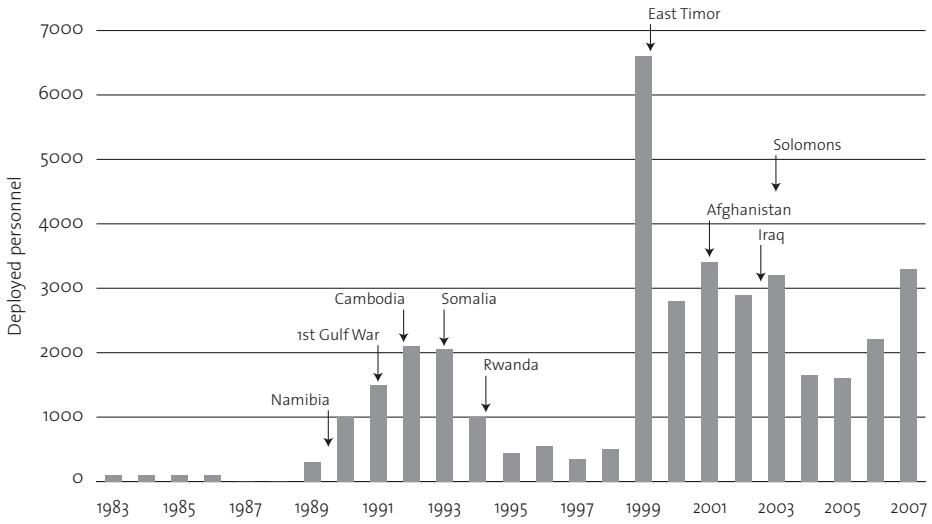
As impressive as the list of operations might look, the total figure of 3,222 is modest in percentage terms, amounting to only 6.3% of the almost 51,500 strong permanent ADF. Counting the numbers of major assets deployed on international operations reveals a similar picture.

The RAAF only has two AP-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft and two C-130 Hercules transports deployed on operations from fleets of 19 and 24 respectively. None of our 71 F/A-18 Hornet fighters, 28 F-111 strike-reconnaissance aircraft, 14 Caribou transports or 4 Boeing 707 refuelling-transports are currently deployed on operations. The new C-17 strategic lift aircraft have, however, already seen service in support of operations in Afghanistan.

As for the RAN, only one of their 13 frigates is presently stationed in the Persian Gulf. The Navy's 15 Patrol Boats (and 2 of 6 Minehunters) are actively engaged in EEZ enforcement year round. There is no current operational role for the remaining major fleet elements, comprising 3 amphibious lift vessels, 6 submarines and 2 major support vessels.

And while the Army supplies most of the personnel currently deployed, of their 34 Black Hawk, 41 Kiowa, 25 Iroquois, 6 Chinook and 6 Tiger helicopters, only 8 Black Hawk and 4 Kiowa are currently deployed offshore. Similarly, of 257 ASLAV and 364 M113 armoured vehicles and roughly 200 Bushmaster infantry mobility vehicles presently in service, only

Figure 1: Indicative numbers of ADF personnel deployed 1983–2007



Source: Report of the Defence Strategic Workforce Planning Review 2003 and data taken from www.defence.gov.au
Note: Arrows show approximate dates for commencement of operations

around 70 ASLAV, 33 M113 and 25 Bushmaster are deployed. None of Army's 71 tanks, 145 artillery pieces or 30 ground based air defence systems are currently being used on operations.

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Nevertheless, although current deployments directly involve only a small proportion of ADF personnel and assets, there is no doubt that the ADF is busy. There are several reasons for this:

First, the numbers of personnel currently abroad do not reflect the scale of initial response that is necessary to establish a presence. In the initial stages of the Solomon Islands operation around 1,400 ADF personnel were deployed, and last year's Timor Leste emergency saw more than 3,000 personnel engaged in the response albeit for limited duration. The indicative figures in Figure 1 fail to capture these significant surges in deployment that arise from time to time.

Second, under the present deployment regime, personnel are employed via a rolling programme of six-month tours that, over time, sees many more individuals deployed than the raw numbers might suggest. This churn of personnel and units disrupts peacetime training and exercises in many quarters of the ADF. As a general rule, to maintain a unit overseas for six months entails three such units; one deployed, one preparing to deploy and one reconstituting.

Third, the geographic spread of operations imposes multiple policy and intelligence overheads that are not diminished by the relatively small scale of our various contingents. While it is true that New Zealand maintains just as diverse a spread of overseas commitments as we do, and does so with far fewer resources, as lead nation in both Solomon Islands and Timor Leste, the buck stops in Australia for intelligence and policy direction.

Fourth, the burden is far from shared evenly, with some parts of the ADF being called upon more often than others to deploy. This is true between the three services, where Army continues to bear the main brunt of operational demand. It is also true at the force element level, where lift capabilities like the RAAF C-130 transport aircraft and RAN amphibious vessels have been almost continuously operational in some way for the last eight years. And it is true at the individual level, where the failure to recruit adequate numbers in specific areas—especially in the skilled trades—has seen some individuals repeatedly called upon to fill gaps.

...the present operational tempo needs to be seen in the context of an ADF that is hard-working even in peacetime.

Finally, the present operational tempo needs to be seen in the context of an ADF that is hard-working even in peacetime. Aside from the challenge of being a small force maintaining a large range of high-tech military capabilities, the ADF is introducing a number of new capabilities under the Defence Capability Plan. On top of this, the ADF undertakes a range of peacetime tasks including the already mentioned border protection role, assistance to remote indigenous communities and emergency

disaster relief operations as necessary. In addition, the ADF conducts an extensive program of inter-service and international exercises each year.

The impact that recent operations have had on the ADF can be directly measured through the Department of Defence's public reporting. Since financial year 2000–01, Defence has been divided into around 28 'outputs' most of which are reported on the basis of three measures:

- **Preparedness**—achieve the readiness and sustainability to undertake military operations with a warning time of less than twelve months
- **Core Skills**—achieve the training necessary to maintain core skills and professional standards across all warfare areas
- **Quantity**—achieve the budgeted levels of activity (e.g. flying hours) and numbers of personnel and assets.

Table 2, displays the extent to which these three measures were either 'achieved', 'substantially achieved' or 'partially achieved' in the first and latest years of reporting, 2000–01 and 2005–06 respectively.

There are a number of observations to make regarding Table 2. To begin with, there are many areas in both years that fell below target for reasons that had nothing to do with operational deployments. Of the 45 areas that had problems in 2000–01, only 10 cited operational deployments as a contributing factor, while in 2005–06 the corresponding proportion was 11 out of 33. Moreover, operational tempo was not usually cited as the sole cause of underperformance, with equipment deficiencies and personnel shortages frequently mentioned as contributing factors. In fact, in 2005–06, personnel shortages and equipment deficiencies together easily outweighed operational tempo as a cause of problems.

Having said that, it is probably difficult for Defence to discern between the impact of systemic personnel shortfalls (due to recruiting under-achievement) and the thinning out of personnel to cover deployed roles.

Consistent with the Army providing the bulk of personnel on operations, most of the areas adversely hit by operational deployments are within that service—fully 80% in 2000-01 and 66% in 2005–06. And while Army's overall performance has declined slightly, both Navy and Air Force have posted improvements; Navy marginally and Air Force manifestly so. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex situation; while both Navy and Air Force have benefited from substantially increased logistics funding for major assets in recent years, Army continues to be hampered by equipment and personnel shortages exacerbated by the burden of multiple operational deployments.

...the ADF has adopted a number of initiatives to mitigate the impact of multiple operations

Interestingly, of the areas adversely affected by operations in 2005–06, fully two out of three were in the area of core skills. This probably reflects a quarantining of the impact of operations so that near-term preparedness targets are met at the expense of core skills that can be re-established later—a sensible risk management strategy. That said; the impact of operations on training exercises was not great in 2005–06. Of five major joint exercises planned for that year only one was not conducted because of conflicting operational commitments, and of 19 planned ADF/United States combined exercises, again only one was cancelled due

Table 2: Output Performance 2000–01 and 2005–06

▼ = adversely impacted by operational demands	2000–01			2005–06		
	Preparedness	Core Skills	Quantity	Preparedness	Core Skills	Quantity
1. DEFENCE OPERATIONS						
1.1 Command of Operations						
1.2 Military Operations						
1.3 National Support Tasks						
2. NAVY						
2.1 Major Surface Combatants						
2.2 Naval Aviation						
2.3 Patrol Boats						
2.4 Submarines						
2.5 Afloat Support						
2.6 Mine Warfare						
2.7 Amphibious Lift						
2.8 Hydrographic		n/a				
3. ARMY						
3.1 Special Ops						
3.2 Medium Combined Arms				▼	▼	
3.3 Light Combined Arms Ops	▼		▼		▼	
3.4 Army Aviation Ops	▼	▼	▼			
3.5 Ground-Based Air Defence						
3.6 Combat Support Ops	▼				▼	
3.7 Regional Surveillance	n/a	n/a	n/a			
3.8 Operational Logistics Spt	▼			▼	▼	
3.9 Motorised Ops		▼			▼	
3.10 Protective Ops						
4. AIR FORCE						
4.1 Air Combat Ops—Strike						
4.2 Combat Support of Air Ops	▼				▼	▼
4.3 Strategic Surveillance & Res						▼
4.4 Air Lift			▼			▼
5. STRATEGIC POLICY						
5.1 Strategic Engagement						
5.2 Military Strategy & Cmd						
6. INTELLIGENCE						

Achieved	Substantially Achieved	Partially Achieved

Quantity: Above 95% = Achieved, 95% to 75% = Substantially, Below 75% = Partially

Source: 2000–01 and 2005–06 Defence Annual Report

to ADF operational commitments (although another four were cancelled at the request of the United States in large measure due to conflicting US operational demands). Of 8 combined ADF/New Zealand exercises and 36 other international exercises, none were listed as having been cancelled due to conflicting operational demands.

More generally, the ADF has adopted a number of initiatives to mitigate the impact of multiple operations. These include:

- The agile shifting of personnel and assets from one operational theatre to another as priorities evolve and circumstances allow. For example, consider the *reported* moves taken in a single six month period in 2006:
    - 21 April: 110 extra troops to Solomon Islands
    - 24 May: withdrawal of 100 troops from Solomon Islands
    - 25 May: 3,000 personnel deployed to Timor Leste
    - 3 August: drawdown of Timor Leste force leaving around 2,000
    - 9 August: 150 additional troops for Afghanistan
    - 4 September: 38 extra troops for Iraq
    - 7 September: 120 extra troops for Timor Leste
    - 15 September: 20 extra troops for Iraq
- Augmentation of the permanent force by Reservists undertaking voluntary full-time service. This includes individual reinforcement of units by Reservists and the deployment of sub-unit Reserve elements to both Timor Leste and Solomon Islands. In 2005–06 the equivalent of 995 Reservists on full-time service were counted as part of the strength of the permanent force.
- Re-roling of personnel from one speciality to another that is in high operational demand. For example, artillery and air defence gunners have performed essentially infantry roles in both Timor Leste and Solomon Islands.
- Back-filling of military administrative and staff positions by civilians to free uniformed personnel for deployment.
- Extensive use of contractor logistics support. Beginning in Timor Leste in 2000, extending to Bougainville in 2001, Solomon Islands in 2003 and the Middle East thereafter, the ADF has employed civilian contractors to perform a range of tasks from sea and air lift to intra-theatre transport and medical services.

So where does this all leave us? In short, the recent operational tempo has had an adverse impact on the reported performance of the ADF. But that impact has been mitigated by a number of innovative initiatives and the application of prudent risk management. And it's important to note that the adverse impact of operations is but one problem along with the shortage of personnel and equipment deficiencies.

For a country that saw its armed forces sparsely employed for the twenty-seven years from 1972 to 1999, it's easy to get used to the idea of a defence force that does little more than hone its professional skills in barracks.

It is worth putting the impact of recent and current operations in context. For a country that saw its armed forces sparsely employed for the twenty-seven years from

1972 to 1999, it's easy to get used to the idea of a defence force that does little more than hone its professional skills in barracks. But that comforting era is now past. With our forces now deployed much more often, it's unrealistic to think that we can maintain the same tempo of training across the full range of warfare areas as we did in the post-Vietnam lull. On the upside, over the past seven years, tens of thousands of ADF personnel have gained operational experience that no amount of peacetime training could ever deliver.

Going back a little further in time, the current operational tempo is not excessive by historical standards. From the 1950s through into the 1970s, during the era of 'forward defence', the ADF maintained significant forces in Southeast Asia including as part of the Far East Strategic Reserve. For example, in 1960 we maintained a battalion group, two fighter squadrons and one bomber squadron in Malaya as well as two destroyer escorts permanently based in Singapore—all from a force of less than 48,000. As the cartoon shows, the question of matching troops to tasks was as topical an issue then as it is today.

Australian forces saw action throughout most of this period, including in the Malayan Emergency from 1950 to 1963 and the confrontation with Indonesia from 1964 to 1966. By 1968 we had 8,000 personnel in Vietnam and 1,200 ground troops in Malaya, amounting to almost 11% of a conscription-swollen permanent force of 84,400. Importantly, the figure of 11% does not take account of our continuing naval and air deployments to Malaya, Singapore and (by that stage) Thailand, where an additional RAAF fighter squadron was based. During this period of intense and arduous operations, the ADF suffered 39 fatalities in the Malayan emergency, 33 in the confrontation with Indonesia and 520 in Vietnam.

Table 3: Comparative allied deployment levels

	Percentage of permanent/ active force deployed
Australia	6.3%
Canada	4.7%
New Zealand	4.0%
United Kingdom	11.3%
United States	15.5% to 20.7%%

Source: Latest official statistics. Foreign data circa late 2006 early 2007.

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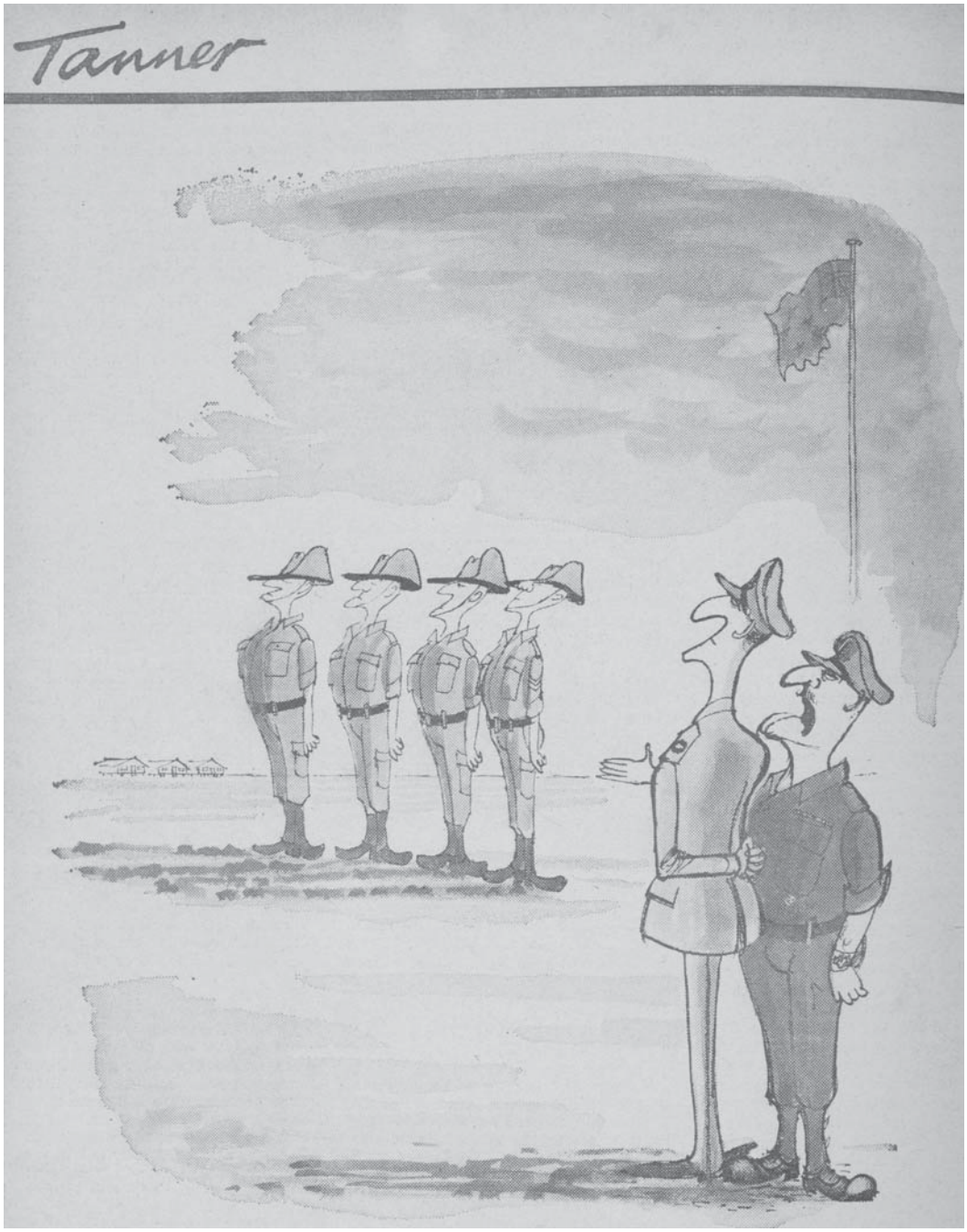
Leaving aside historical precedents, comparison with the Australian Federal Police (AFP) provides an interesting benchmark. As of late 2006 the AFP had 313 of its members (excluding seconded State police) serving overseas as members of its International Deployments Group. Given that the AFP has 2,396 Sworn Officers and 1,743 Australian Protective Service (APS) Officers, this implies a rate of deployment of somewhere between 8.6% and 13.1% depending on the extent to which APS officers are involved—well above the 6.3% deployed by the ADF. It must be noted, however, that as a more homogeneous organisation than the ADF, the AFP can more easily draw upon its entire workforce for deployments unhindered by the barrier of specialisation.

A more relevant comparison can be made with our allies. Table 3 shows how our level of operational deployment compares with those maintained by some of them. Although Canada and New Zealand have only 4.7% and 4.0 % of their permanent force deployed on



That's Carmichael our commitment to Malaysia, Shadbolt our commitment to Borneo, O'Toole our commitment to Vietnam and Gribble our defence of the mainland.' *by courtesy of* The Bulletin, *November 14, 1964*

operations at the present, both the United States and Britain maintain far higher proportions. As of late 2006, prior to the announcement of the surge in Iraq, the United States already had 15.5% of their active force deployed in the Middle East and Africa and a further 5.2% deployed in East Asia. Early in 2007, the United Kingdom had 11.3% of their active force operationally deployed (and a further 13.8% engaged in non-operational deployments).

Both the United States and British military are, however, under a good deal of pressure due to current operations. Not only is the tempo high but the intensity of operations is exacting a heavy toll with the United States losing around 3,228 and Britain 420 lives in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. In Iraq alone, the United States has had 24,314 wounded of which 7,267 required medical air transport plus another 6,991 non-hostile injuries that also required medical air transport.

One key observation is that there is no sign that the Australian Government has considered a mandatory call-out of the Reserve in the past six years.

To maintain such high levels of operational deployment in adverse circumstances, both the United States and Britain have exercised a mandatory call-out of normally part-time reserve personnel. The United States is stretched to the extent that it has been forced to employ 'stop loss' powers to compel individuals to remain in the military past their previously agreed enlistment period. If Australia were to follow the United States and deploy 15% to 20% of its active duty force it would be similarly stretched—but we are a long way from that yet. We are also a long way from imposing the gruelling 'twelve months on—twelve months off' deployment cycle employed by the United States, a cycle that was stretched in April 2007 for personnel in Iraq who had their tours of duty extended to fifteen months.

One key observation is that there is no sign that the Australian Government has considered a mandatory call-out of the Reserve in the past six years. While such a move might be politically difficult, the current government has taken deliberate steps to ensure that the ADF Reserve is ready and able to be called out if necessary. In 2000 the Parliament passed two key pieces of legislation in this regard. The first extended the circumstances for Reserve call out and enabled the payment of incentives and compensation to employers of Reservists and self-employed Reservists. The second put in place protection for Reservists in employment and education.

Then, in 2002, the government created several new categories of Reserve. These include a *High Readiness Reserve* that is able to deploy in 28 days notice or less and a *Standby Reserve* of recently discharged permanent ADF members who enlisted after 1 July 2003. Currently, the *High Readiness Reserve* has 1,100 personnel and the *Standby Reserve* is of undisclosed strength. Together, these new categories of Reserve augment an *Active Reserve* of 18,850 to produce a total reserve force liable for call-out of at least 20,000. That constitutes an additional 40% of the full-time ADF strength. Until such time as a call-out of the Reserve is at least mooted, the ADF has some measure of spare capacity remaining.

...how does the current situation look to the men and women of the ADF who carry the day-to-day burden?

While the foregoing analysis seems reassuring, the question remains; how does the current situation look to the men and women of the ADF who carry the day-to-day burden? Ultimately, this is the critical issue. For a volunteer force like ours, it is the willingness of individuals to continue to serve that is critical for both the maintenance of ongoing operations and the sustainability of the ADF in the longer-term.

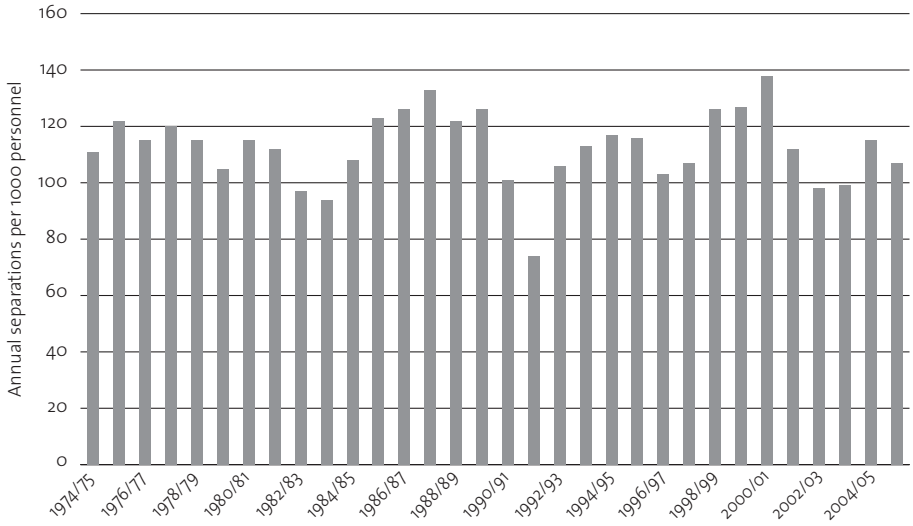
Table 4: Average military separations per 1,000 permanent personnel			
	32-year average	**5 year average**	**2005-06**
Navy	116 ± 14	114 ± 8	113
Army	121 ± 16	115 ± 11	124
Air Force	95 ± 19	85 ± 11	82
ADF	**113 ± 13**	**106 ± 8**	**107**

Note: ± represents one standard deviation
Source: Defence Annual Reports

With unemployment at a three decade low, and the economy enjoying its fourteenth consecutive year of economic growth, ADF members have the option of voting with their feet if the operational tempo is placing too high a burden on them and their families. However, although there are specific skills categories (submariners for example) where retention is a problem, retention is not a problem in aggregate.

As Table 4 shows, the rate of separations last year, and across the previous five years when the operational tempo has been high, are not significantly different to that which arose over the period commencing 1974–75 which includes extensive periods of both high unemployment and low operational tempo. Figure 3 displays the same information graphically by plotting the number of ADF members per 1,000 that have separated from full-time service in each financial year from 1974–75 to 2005–06. No change can be discerned over the recent period of high operational tempo except perhaps in 2000–01 corresponding to the year after the INTERFET operation when the level of deployment was more than twice that today.

Figure 3: Annual ADF separations per 1,000 permanent personnel



Source: Defence Annual Reports

Conclusion

The data and analysis presented herein can be summarised as follows:

- Recent operational demands have put pressure on the ADF in general and the Army in particular. This pressure compounds pre-existing problems due to personnel shortages and equipment deficiencies.
- Adept risk management and innovative strategies are helping to mitigate the impact of overlapping and concurrent operations.
- The operational burden borne by the ADF is commensurate with historical precedents post-WWII and is far less than that currently faced by the United States and Britain today.
- Critically, there has been no discernable increase to the rate of separations from the ADF compared with historical norms.

Taken together, these points lead to the judgement that while the ADF is busy and under some pressure, it is not yet overstretched.

Endnote

1 The question of overstretch, as defined by these questions, is separate from the equally important question of whether the ADF has adequate capacity to deal with credible contingencies that might arise given our strategic circumstances.

About the Author

Prior to joining ASPI, **Mark Thomson** held a number of positions in Defence working in the areas of capability development and resource management. In 1999 he was Political Military Adviser to Major General Peter Cosgrove during the INTERFET operation. Prior to his time with Defence, Mark held a series of academic research and teaching positions in theoretical physics.

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