

House of Representatives, Monday 21 October 2002

**COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report**

**Mr JULL** (Fadden) (1.14 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report entitled *Visit to Australian forces deployed to the international coalition against terrorism: parliament's watching brief on the war on terrorism*.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr JULL** —I am delighted to present this report on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. It reports on a visit undertaken in July this year by a delegation of nine members of the committee to Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on active service in the Middle East and Central Asia as part of Australia's contribution to the international coalition against terrorism. The delegation travelled by Defence Force aircraft and met with personnel deployed at the Australian National Command Element in Kuwait; Royal Australian Navy personnel enforcing UN sanctions against Iraq in the Persian Gulf; Royal Australian Air Force personnel conducting air-to-air refuelling operations from Kyrgyzstan; and forces from the Special Air Service Regiment conducting operations in Afghanistan. The visit was part of a wider program of activities being undertaken by the committee to monitor Australia's ongoing commitment to the war on terrorism. Those members fortunate enough to participate in the visit now have a far more comprehensive understanding of the nature and effectiveness of Australia's commitment than can be achieved by receiving briefings in Parliament House. This report is one of the ways in which we are seeking to make this experience available to a wider audience.

An equally important element of the visit was to demonstrate the Australian parliament's strong bipartisan support and the support of the Australian community for the Defence Force personnel deployed on these operations. We were extremely impressed by the outstanding professionalism and dedication to duty being displayed by our service men and women in demanding and, at times, hostile circumstances. They are performing with great distinction and have earned the respect and admiration of the international forces with whom they are working. All Australians should be immensely proud of their achievements and the contribution they are making to the success of the international coalition against terrorism.

In our report, as well as describing the visit, we make a number of observations about Australia's force commitment to the coalition. It was clear, for example, that each of the force elements deployed is making a highly relevant contribution and is displaying outstanding levels of professionalism and commitment. The quality of the contribution is demonstrated by the extent to which Australian forces are directly engaged in the planning, conduct and coordination of operations. In Afghanistan, the Special Forces Task Group is fully integrated into the coalition effort and provides a niche capacity, built upon a unique mix of training, skills, tactics, temperament and equipment. In the Persian Gulf, not only are our Navy ships operating at a high tempo, but tactical control of the whole maritime interception force is currently being exercised by an Australian commander and his staff. In Kyrgyzstan, RAAF air and ground crews were, until their recent return to Australia, achieving remarkably high levels of aircraft serviceability and mission success. In addition, an Australian officer was intimately involved in operational planning and coordination as the coalition air operations officer.

We were also interested to learn more about the complex command and control arrangements in place for the ADF contribution to the coalition. Although not implying that there are significant failings in the command structure, we have concluded that elements of the existing structure warrant careful consideration. We will, through our Defence Subcommittee, further examine the effectiveness of these arrangements and any other arrangements developed for similar deployments in the future. One matter on which we have made recommendations is the issuing of awards to deployed personnel to recognise their service. Our first recommendation is that the government and the Department of Defence should take concerted action to overcome the evident delays in issuing the Australian Active Service Medal to those personnel entitled to receive the medal. Ideally, this medal should be available to be awarded immediately upon completion of a tour of duty. Our second recommendation is that, given the warlike nature of this deployment, the Minister for Defence should consider issuing an Australian campaign medal to those Australian Defence Force personnel who have served on operations in support of the international coalition.

There is no doubt that the international coalition's current operational tempo has diminished, especially in Afghanistan. It is widely accepted that the initial phase of the operation has passed and that the priority now is to help the Afghan government establish effective control within its territory. The recent return of the RAAF deployment and public debate about the possible recall of the special forces contingent is evidence of this new phase of operations. It may, however, be premature to expect the imminent return of all Australian deployed forces. Continued vigilance is required in Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda and Taliban forces from regrouping before the Afghan government is able to exert security control. Moreover, the work of the maritime interception force in the Persian Gulf seems unlikely to wind down in view of ongoing debates in the United Nations about the enforcement of UN resolutions against Iraq. Of course, the terrible bombing in Bali reminds us all that the fight against terrorism is far from over. (Time expired)

**Mr PRICE** (Chifley) (1.20 p.m.) —In rising to speak to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade report entitled *Visit to Australian forces deployed to the international coalition against terrorism: parliament's watching brief on the war on terrorism*, let me say at the outset that two members who participated in the visit to the Australian forces—Bruce Scott, the chairman of the Defence Subcommittee, and the member for Kingsford Smith—are overseas at the United Nations, and the honourable member for Brand, who was also a member of the delegation, is unable to be with us today but has already had an opportunity to comment on his experience of the trip.

I strongly hold the view that, if it is good enough for the parliament to send troops overseas to serve the nation, it is good enough for some members of parliament to go and see them where they have been deployed. I have to confess to having been bitterly disappointed not to have been a member of this particular delegation. Post the events in Bali, it is ironic to think that, in such a short period of time since this visit occurred, this report is about here and now. As important as our commitment to Afghanistan and the war on terrorism has been, Bali has changed a lot of equations.

As the report highlights, whether we are talking about our Navy, Air Force, Army or the special services regiment, our forces operate with great professionalism and make a contribution beyond their mere numbers. If anyone is in any doubt about that, I suggest they read the report; it is unequivocal.

The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and its Defence Subcommittee have, on a number of occasions, brought down similar reports. In the mid-1990s, we brought down a report on peacekeeping which, with the effluxion of time, almost seems to be a case of naïve painting, although it was controversial at the time because of the number of people we thought we should or should not be sending overseas on these missions. Two years ago, the committee brought down a report called *From phantom to force*. There were only 12 recommendations in that report but it is important to point out that the very first recommendation was that the government should consider establishing a national security council. Although it is some 25 months since that report was tabled in the parliament, it is a matter of deep regret that there has been no government response to it. I cannot say to members of parliament that, if we had had a national security council, the events in Bali would have been avoided, but I can say that not having a national security council did not prevent the events in Bali.

I urge the government to pick up the recommendations—the member for Fadden mentioned two in particular—and the issue of command and control that are mentioned in the report. I earnestly request the government, some 25 months after the report has been delivered, to provide an official government response to the report *From phantom to force*. I commend to all honourable members this report entitled *Visit to Australian forces deployed to the international coalition against terrorism: parliament's watching brief on the war on terrorism*. As always, we should be very proud of the service our serving men and women provide this nation and have provided in the war on terrorism. This report is worth reading.

**Mr PROSSER** (Forrest) (1.25 p.m.) —In July this year I joined eight members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on a visit to Australian Defence personnel deployed in the Middle East and Central Asia as part of Australia's contribution to the international coalition against terrorism. The objectives of our visit were threefold: firstly, to contribute to parliament's understanding of Australia's commitment to the international coalition against terrorism; secondly, to enhance wider public awareness of the nature and value of Australia's commitment to the international coalition; and thirdly, to demonstrate parliament's bipartisan support for the Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on coalition operations. I am pleased to report that we met all these objectives in full.

During our visit, we met with personnel from the Australian National Command Element in Kuwait, Royal Australian Navy personnel deployed on interception operations in the Persian Gulf, Royal Australian Air Force personnel conducting air-to-air refuelling operations from Kyrgyzstan and forces from the Special Air Service Regiment conducting operations in Afghanistan. Australia's Special Air Service Regiment, which forms the Australian Special Forces Task Group, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rick Burr, provides a specialist capability that is respected and regularly used by senior coalition commanders. The judgment, discipline and control exercised in carefully distinguishing between terrorist and non-terrorist hostile groups helped preserve life and gain valuable intelligence. The capability of Australian special forces was demonstrated on many occasions over the campaign, most notably during the largest battle—Operation Anaconda.

The professionalism and dedication to duty displayed by our service men and women is deserving of our respect. The conditions under which they are working are extreme, yet we did not hear a single complaint. Indeed, the personnel we met were pleased with their ability to stay in touch with family and friends through the Internet, email and the telephone. When

we visited Bagram, the forces were, properly, monitoring a football game in which the Dockers were in front. It is important that they keep in touch with what is going on at home.

In addition to visiting Australian troops deployed in the region, the trip gave us an opportunity to meet our coalition partners in the war on terror. One such notable occasion was our visit to the US helicopter flight line at Camp Doha, where we were taken on a terrain familiarisation flight over Kuwait on board a US Black Hawk helicopter. The flight gave us an opportunity to see the region known as the 'boneyard' near the Iraqi border where the wrecks of an enormous number of Iraqi vehicles and equipment destroyed during the Gulf War have been stockpiled.

The helicopter flight also gave us insight into the oppressive conditions in the desert, where temperatures across the barren, shadeless ground exceeded 50 degrees Celsius. That also applied to our personnel in the Gulf. One can only imagine how unbearable these conditions must be for soldiers on the ground in armoured vehicles. We were indeed grateful for the terrain flight and briefings provided by the US helicopter commanders and crew. The coalition partners we met gave us a constant reminder of the dedication and effectiveness of Australian personnel deployed in the region. One could not help but feel immensely proud to be an Australian as the coalition commanders outlined their praise for our personnel.

In addition to better understanding the contribution made by our service personnel, the visit also provided an opportunity for standing committee members to remind our service men and women that their efforts were greatly appreciated by the rest of the country. While all of our people deployed in the region could be regarded as quiet achievers, they were pleased to know that the thoughts of other Australians are with them.

Despite the conditions in which the special forces operated and the conditions that Navy personnel operate in in the Gulf—52 degrees Celsius—they are doing a remarkable job and they are doing it with a smile on their faces. I think the families of the Australian forces deployed in the coalition against terrorism should be immensely proud of the job they are doing, as I know all Australians are.

**Mr GIBBONS** (Bendigo) (1.30 p.m.)—I rise to speak on this report replacing my good friend and colleague Graham Edwards, the member for Cowan, who has been detained in Perth attending a commemorative service for those from his electorate who were lost as a result of the tragic events in Bali on 12 October.

As has been stated before, in July this year a delegation of nine members from the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade visited Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on active service in the Middle East and Central Asia as part of Australia's contribution to the international coalition against terrorism. Joining them for part of that mission were four MP's who were participating in the Australian Defence Force Parliamentary Program, and I was fortunate enough to be part of that group. Both delegations met with the personnel deployed at the Australian National Command Element in Kuwait; the Royal Australian Air Force personnel conducting air-to-air refueling operations from Kyrgyzstan; forces from Special Air Service Regiment conducting operations in Afghanistan; and also the Royal Australian Navy personnel enforcing UN sanctions against Iraq in the Persian Gulf.

Our Navy has HMAS *Melbourne*, an Adelaide class guided missile frigate, and HMAS *Arunta*, an Anzac class frigate, currently serving in the Persian Gulf. They are enforcing a

United Nations Security Council resolution to prevent the import and export of illegal goods to Iraq. Only illegal cargoes are seized or turned back; medical equipment, food and other essential goods are permitted for humanitarian reasons. The Australian Navy has been directing the operations since January this year and commenced full-time command of the entire coalition fleet in April this year.

As the member for Fadden has stated, both delegations were extremely impressed by the outstanding professionalism and dedication to duty being displayed by our service men and women in demanding and at times hostile circumstances. They are performing with great distinction and have earned the respect and admiration of the international forces with whom they are working.

A key part of the visit was to demonstrate parliament's strong bipartisan support, and the support of the Australian community, for the Defence Force personnel deployed on these operations. I support the member for Fadden when he said all Australians should be immensely proud of their achievements and the contribution they are making to the success of the international coalition against terrorism. In fact, we can be very proud of all our personnel in the defence forces, whether they are serving overseas or at home. But I stress: our defence forces are just that, defence forces. They are, in the main part, not designed or equipped to go off and attack another country—something that they may well be asked to do in the near future if the President of the United States carries out his stated intention of launching an attack on Iraq. We must exercise extreme caution if asked to support such an attack, especially when the motivation for such a request has a strong chance of being just symbolism—an attempt by the American President to enlist the support of our nation to get him over a major domestic political problem he is experiencing as a result of his stated intentions for war with Iraq.

Opposition Leader Simon Crean and other Labor spokespeople have consistently stated that any additional—and I use the word 'additional' because we already have forces deployed in the Middle East in the war against terrorism; indeed, that is the reason for this report being tabled today—Australian military involvement involving an attack on Iraq should only be considered after endorsement from the United Nations Security Council, or after new and overwhelming evidence linking Iraq with al-Qaeda—evidence which is yet to materialise in spite of a lengthy and vigorous debate in the American congress, which has now voted to support President Bush's objectives on Iraq, and the release of the Blair document containing information gathered by British Intelligence.

I said in an earlier speech in this House that one of the questions that remain unanswered is why Saddam Hussein appears to be adding to his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. We should not forget that this is a military dictatorship and, as such, it thrives on the fear of foreign enemies and military danger. But is it also because the present enemies that surround Iraq and its allies also have this capability? Is it because Israel also has powerful weapons and may not be afraid to use them? Is it because Saddam Hussein is just as paranoid as other more belligerent elements in the US government? Is he too just another megalomaniac?

These questions remain unanswered but there is no doubt that, after the horrendous and tragic events in Bali on 12 October, an ever increasing number of Australians now demand that all our defence forces concentrate their efforts on the war against terrorism at home and in our own region, not halfway around the world in a country whose threat to Australia's wellbeing, and in fact the wellbeing of the United States, is yet to be identified.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Hon. I.R. Causley)—Time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for Fadden wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

**Mr Jull**—I move that the House take note of the report and seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.