

Senate, Monday 16 June 1997

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

Senator MacGIBBON (Queensland) —On behalf of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the report entitled Defence sub-committee visit to Exercise Tandem Thrust 97, 12-14 March 1997, together with the minutes of proceedings. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to this report.

Leave granted.

Senator MacGIBBON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

Senator MacGIBBON —I seek leave to incorporate my tabling statement and to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

The statement read as follows—

Exercise Tandem Thrust was conducted in the first months of this year, culminating in March in 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 involve the forces of several regional nations, Exercise Tandem Thrust was a bilateral exercise, involving only Australian and US forces.

This was a major exercise from an ADF perspective, involving direct participation by over 21,000 US personnel, almost 6,000 ADF members, 43 naval vessels and over 200 aircraft. Exercises of this nature, and on this scale, are an important way to confirm and practice interoperability of forces and planning staffs with our most important ally, the United States, in a joint and combined military environment. This exercise was noteworthy because it was the first truly combined, all-environment, strategic-level activity that had been 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 US command structure.

Beyond the aim of exercising ADF capabilities, Tandem Thrust served also as a reaffirmation of our continued friendship and alliance with the United States. It followed current Government policy in supporting US strategic engagement and activities in the region, which in turn contributes towards regional security. In this respect, Exercise Tandem Thrust was an important outcome of the AUSMIN talks held in July last year, between the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. One outcome of those talks, the Joint Security Declaration (also known as the Sydney Statement), saw Tandem Thrust as a major step towards the ADF/US Pacific Command vision for future combined operations.

Clearly, one of the key outcomes of such a major exercise must be to test our military interoperability with the US, as our most powerful and important ally. However, a significant concern identified during the Sub-Committee's visit was that the ADF currently lags the US military in the fields of communications and information systems. The Sub-Committee was shown a number of innovative software applications, and communications systems used in the field by the ADF. Of themselves, these were encouraging. However, as the US military aggressively develops its capabilities in these areas, there exists an incipient danger of our defence forces falling further behind, to a level where we may be unable to interconnect with US systems. A defence force which cannot interconnect with the essential operational systems of its allies, in order to produce a seamless network, is liable to be at a significant disadvantage in the likely information-intensive operations of future conflicts. I commend

close attention to this field, as I believe that this area should be afforded priority in ADF force development.

The Sub-Committee also observed other aspects of the exercise which were a source of some concern. Prime amongst these was that the exercise was structured to meet US training requirements, rather than those of the ADF. Given the preponderance of US forces in the exercise, and the need to attract US participation in initiating the Tandem Thrust exercise series, this deficiency is understandable. However, in later exercises of this series, I would like to see Australian training requirements given primacy, and planning done around a scenario more in keeping with requirements for the defence of Australia.

The weather, as always, is one of the exigencies with which a military must deal, and this exercise provided ample demonstration of that truism. The maritime forces were hampered and delayed by the encroachment of tropical cyclone Justin, and various aspects of the exercise were forced to be postponed, modified, or deleted from the exercise plan. This should not be viewed as a failure of either the exercise planning or the forces involved. The senior personnel with whom we spoke viewed this apparent hitch quite positively, pointing out that it necessitated exercise of a considerable degree of flexibility on the part of the planning staffs involved, and effectively simulated one aspect of the 'fog of war' with which military forces would have to contend in a situation of genuine conflict.

My comments on Tandem Thrust would be incomplete if I did not mention environmental issues, as these matters were accorded considerable attention by the media in the weeks preceding the field training phase of the exercise. This was in part because the exercise was conducted in Shoalwater Bay Training Area, which overlaps in some areas the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. I must commend the planning staffs of both the Australian and US militaries in their planning to address these concerns. A combined monitoring team was established to ensure that environmental concerns could be treated sympathetically, while still achieving the realistic training objectives intended. Briefing of the personnel involved on their environmental responsibilities was reportedly comprehensive. The Sub-Committee viewed several examples during their visit where military procedures were modified to ensure compliance with environmental restrictions, yet these adjustments did not seem to detract from the overall conduct and training value resulting from the exercise. This impression was confirmed in briefings from the Commander of the Exercise Control Group, Rear Admiral Kenneth Fisher of the US Navy. It is worthy of note that these two aspects—environmental restrictions and exercise requirements—are not incompatible, and I congratulate those involved for their sympathetic treatment to achieve a satisfactory outcome. I don't want to create the impression that the Australian Defence Force are newcomers with respect to environmental concerns. They have always recognised that Training areas are a finite and valuable asset. Since the end of the Second World War, the ADF have been ahead of the community in managing the preservation of their training areas.

Finally, the Sub-Committee's visit provided an excellent opportunity to meet and speak with members of the ADF operating in the field, and we were impressed by the enthusiasm and level of innovation shown by those personnel we met. We viewed the ease with which the forces of both countries were able to integrate, from high level command appointments down to the soldier in the field, operating in a combined environment with their counterparts in the US Marine Corps and US Army. I believe that the exercise was worthwhile and successful at all levels, as was the visit by the Defence Sub-Committee. I would like to thank the Minister for Defence and the military and civilian personnel of the Australian Defence Force, who assisted in ensuring the success of the Sub-Committee's visit to Exercise Tandem Thrust 97. Debate adjourned.