

Reflections on the Truce Monitoring Group

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"... Militarily, *Operation Bel Isi* got off to a shaky and rushed start in late 1997. Some senior Australian Defence Force (ADF) officers were very cautious about being drawn into a New Zealand-led unarmed peace support operation in Bougainville. In the months leading up to *Operation Bel Isi* they ignored warnings that a peace support operation was in the offing and, secondly, refused to engage the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) in contingency planning.

"Australian diplomats, however, had realised as early as June 1997 that they could not move a peace process forward in Bougainville unilaterally and that it was essential to have the support of New Zealand and other regional allies like Fiji and Vanuatu. They urged the ADF to recognise the importance of military support in the formation of a Truce Monitoring Group (TMG), arguing that the TMG was ... the best chance for the Papua New Guinea Government to solve a national problem after the Sandline Affair in March 1997 had opened the door again for a negotiated settlement.

"Military planning for the TMG did not begin in earnest until mid-November. This resulted in a rushed deployment and saw some considerable friction between Australian and New Zealand military personnel in Bougainville during the initial weeks of the operation. There were also problems in the integration of Australian Public Service peace monitors. Because the ADF had not engaged the NZDF until two weeks before deployment, civilian monitors were selected quickly, preparation and administration were rushed and inadequate. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Department of Defence, AusAID and the Australian Federal Police all contributed monitors. Internally, they were from different institutional cultures...

"There were difficulties in the integration of Fijian and ni-Vanuatu military personnel as well. Fijians came with a wealth of experience in peace-keeping in the Middle East but found the adjustment to being unarmed and working in monitoring teams, and in two cases commanding monitoring teams, a significant challenge. The Fijians and ni-Vanuatu found some Australian and New Zealand military personnel vulgar, hedonistic and lacking in cultural sensitivity; some ni-Vanuatu personnel were overwhelmed by the scale of the operation and by long patrols carrying heavy loads over rugged terrain. New Zealand and most ADF personnel tended to treat them as interpreters and appeared condescending of their lack of military experience and skills.

"The adjustment to being deployed into harm's way without weapons was a challenge for most military personnel. This resulted in the deployment of New Zealand Special Force personnel into monitoring teams and intelligence assets into Bougainville to monitor the security situation. Consequently, military personnel were

often wary and defensive. This focus led to cautious political and cultural engagement with Bougainvilleans. It took some time for the military to appreciate that Bougainvilleans were the best source of force protection. Over time military personnel became more confident.

"The emphasis in the TMG (and subsequently, the ADF-led Peace Monitoring Group PMG) was on military mechanics – partly as a result of concentrating on force protection and partly because the exact nature of monitoring operations was not well practised or understood. Little effort was devoted to political and cultural engagement with the factions and groups on Bougainville. New Zealand and ADF officers and senior NCOs concentrated on patrolling to as many villages as possible to hand out printed material. They convened peace awareness meetings, delivered their message and left. There was also an emphasis on information gathering to identify any threat to TMG/PMG personnel and property. Security consciousness was high and military formalities, routine and procedures, though more relaxed, were still enforced....

"Leadership at the higher levels was a significant factor in turning around the situation.... The second factor contributing to the turnaround was the internal blending of cultures: all personnel shared the adversities and challenges of operating unarmed in remote locations. This shared adversity included pitching in on domestic duties and participating in rosters monitoring radios. Monitoring teams were well led by senior and experienced New Zealand, ni-Vanuatu and Fijian commanding officers who got on with political and cultural engagement and bonded their teams together....

"Over time patrols spent longer in villages and patrol commanders were allocated the same villages to visit to facilitate a deepening of relationships. Patrols took the time to listen to stories, appreciating the world of villagers and creating empathy and trust. There were also opportunities during these visits to establish friendships. Though members of the TMG/PMG were there only for a few months, friendships did form and all of these contributed in their own small way to the Bougainvilleans at the grassroots level having confidence in the peace process....

"From the beginning the TMG/PMG was supported by a first-class medical facility. This facility took care of Australians, New Zealanders, Fijians and ni-Vanuatu. However, it treated and continues to treat critically ill Bougainvilleans. The TMG/PMG has saved many lives, particularly those of mothers and newborn babies. The word soon got around that the TMG/PMG didn't have to do this, but was evacuating and treating critically ill people for humanitarian reasons.

"Sport was another way to extend the hand of friendship. The TMG/PMG set up sporting competitions. You now have a situation where some former combatants line up to play volleyball and soccer on the same teams. Members of the TMG/PMG also participate. There's been a strong emphasis on sport facilitating the peace process.

"Food has been another way of extending the hand of friendship. There's nothing like scheduling meetings around lunch or dinnertime to get people along, when there is plenty of food for all. The sharing of food is culturally important. The TMG/PMG reciprocates the generosity and hospitality found in villages all over Bougainville.

"Music has greatly assisted the effectiveness of the TMG/PMG. Monitors from New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu brought their own music and singing. Australians do not have much musical culture to offer but soon joined in and contributed their own interpretations of popular Western music. Australian and New Zealand military bands have toured Bougainville on several occasions. Music, dancing and singing have contributed enormously to breaking the ice. It's important to point out that the PNG security forces have been included in cultural engagement. Sport, the sharing of food and attendance at musical events have eased the tensions evident at the beginning of the operation....

"Civilian monitors and key military appointments receive intensive language training in Tok Pisin (Melanesian Pidgin), the lingua franca of Bougainville and PNG. This language training is integrated with political and cultural briefings that assist those about to serve in Bougainville to understand and adapt to the differences between conventional military operations and peace support operations. During pre-deployment training, ADF personnel are familiarised with the culture of their allies and are directed to respect their religion and culture.

"In summary, *Operation Bel Isi* has been a learning experience for the military.... Operation Bel Isi has also been good for Bougainville and the PNG Government. A four-nation military organisation has provided medical care, confidence, presence and friendship. They have shown Bougainvilleans and PNG Government security forces that the military can be peacemakers and not always war makers. As Brigadier Mortlock, first NZ Commander of the TMG, used to say, 'Supporting the peace process in Bougainville is a good thing, worth doing well.'"