

The military refashions its image

# An unprecedented standdown of the Australian armed forces

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An unprecedented event in the history of the Australian military took place last month. On February 5, the entire 50,000 strong army, navy and air force was stood down for two hours to listen to a video address by the Chief of the Defence Forces, Admiral Chris Barrie, denouncing the existence of “rough justice” within their ranks.

The military hierarchy employs the term “rough justice” as a code word for the physical or psychological abuse of personnel to impose discipline. It is known more commonly as “bastardisation”.

Last year, leading Australian media outlets, as well as *Time* magazine, gave prominent coverage to an internal military police investigation that found at least 24 members of the army's parachute battalion, 3RAR, had been assaulted by other members of the unit between April 1996 and April 1999.

Among the cases cited by *Time* was that of an army cook who was beaten unconscious by paratroopers because he did not stand up when 3RAR's colours were paraded through the mess hall. A number of those assaulted had been accused of theft. A 3RAR company sergeant major, a senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) responsible for more than 100 men, allegedly told his subordinates: “If you catch anyone thieving you should beat them to within an inch of their lives. Drag them bleeding in front of my desk and nothing will be said.” The military police found that a “culture of violence” existed within the unit.

Barrie appealed to the military ranks to collaborate with an audit of the military justice system, headed by a retired Federal Court judge. The audit commission will take evidence from serving and retired members of the armed forces and report to the government and military high command in April. A special phone hotline was established at the beginning of the year to take anonymous testimony. According to Barrie, calls were coming in within hours of the stand down, on top of 125 separate cases reported during January.

Barrie made clear to the assembled troops that the audit was demanded from outside the military. He opened his February 5 address by referring to the “considerable media speculation, and parliamentary interest in, the extent to which a culture of rough justice exists in some parts of the ADF”. He added: “The intensity of community concerns about this issue, as you and I have seen them, cannot be disregarded.”

A total of 12 members of 3RAR were charged with offences arising out of the investigation. Three men have been found guilty by military courts and the trial of another is underway on charges that he assaulted a soldier accused of stealing a Playstation game. The current audit is likely to result in the purge of at least some serving officers and NCOs who have tolerated abuse.

The “rough justice” investigation comes in the wake of other media exposés of practices within the armed forces that have resulted in high level military and parliamentary inquiries.

Within the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), where officers are trained, a major internal investigation in 1998 documented the brutalisation of cadets. An Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) television documentary, *The Academy*, that began airing on February 20, reported that in 1998 first-year cadets, including females, were having their faces slapped by the genitals of higher-ranking male cadets as a disciplinary measure. The military was compelled to dramatically alter discipline procedures at ADFA last year.

During the Timor operation in 1999, the Australian media gave considerable coverage to accusations that the elite Special Air Service (SAS) regiment had tortured Timorese militia and posed for photographs with the bodies of militia they had killed. In response, an official investigation was conducted. An incident in which a female sailor fell overboard during a drunken binge on a transport ship was widely publicised, as was the harassment of local women in the Timorese capital of Dili by drunken army personnel.

Last December, as concerns over military brutalisation were being raised, the *Australian* published a report that paratroopers were openly campaigning in the barracks for the right-wing, anti-Asian and anti-immigrant One Nation party. A former officer told the newspaper: “Some soldiers certainly held extreme views and let them be known. There were moments where they overstepped the mark, expressing their views a mite too aggressively and pushing them onto other people in a public place.” At least three paratroopers active in the unit during 1998 were exposed as members of a neo-Nazi rock band, Blood Oath.

A military spokesman made the frank admission that the “nature” of 3RAR “maybe attracted more of those guys” (i.e. white supremacists and neo-Nazis) but went on to defend the right of “religious and political expression” within the armed forces. There is little question that the response of the military hierarchy would have been completely different had the media found soldiers openly campaigning for socialist politics.

While the bulk of the military hierarchy and the media publicly backed Barrie's appeal, there have been a few dissenters who argue that the brutalisation of soldiers is an essential part of military training and discipline.

One 3RAR NCO for example told *Time* that rough justice upheld “unit cohesiveness and operational effectiveness”. Frank Devine, a right-wing columnist for the *Australian*, declared: “The language of the future officers of our armed forces is racist, sexist, violent, cynical, obscene and sprinkled heavily with archaisms. Most people wouldn't talk like that. But most people don't face the prospect of having to confront an enemy...” Devine concluded: “We should be very careful about making pussy cats of our soldiers”.

Devine's comments simply confirm that “rough justice,” backwardness and racism are not simply tolerated but have been integral to Australian

military training and ideology. To understand why—as well as the reasons for the current campaign—it is necessary to examine the role of the armed forces in light of the changing needs of Australian capitalism.

The Australian military uses methods of training and discipline similar to those employed around the world. Instructors at training facilities are taught to subject recruits to repeated verbal and psychological abuse and intense physical pressure in order to inculcate instinctive obedience to orders and to weed out those not capable of coping with extreme stress.

An essential aim of such training is to impart the view that those who cannot endure such mental and physical punishment, especially the vast mass of civilians who have never experienced it, are inferior. Identification with the military and its *esprit de corps* is developed through a sense of unity and superiority that arises out of having suffered a common ordeal.

The training programs for admission into elite units such as the anti-terrorist SAS are based on the same principle and involve even more severe levels of stress. It is not surprising that within the parachute battalion, which presents itself as one of the Australian military's premier combat units, officers and NCOs encourage direct physical assaults on those deemed to have betrayed the unit's code.

To a greater or lesser extent such methods prevail in the other armed state bodies, such as the police. Taken together, their purpose is to defend the propertied, corporate and financial elite against perceived threats to its interests, both external threats from capitalist rivals and internal ones from the working class. The Australian armed forces are trained not only for foreign interventions, but for “aid to the civil power”—the police—involving the suppression of strikes, demonstrations or political upheavals.

The contradiction that confronts all capitalist security forces is that the personnel expected to carry out these tasks are overwhelmingly recruited from among the working and lower middle classes. If they are to be reliable instruments for the ruling elite, their members have to be molded to identify with the state, regardless of their own class origins. This is achieved not only through various disciplinary methods but also through ideology. Nationalist and patriotic conceptions are channeled into the military in a particularly concentrated way. Threats to the capitalist class, whether external or domestic, are presented as a threat to the nation.

During the Cold War, Australian capitalism functioned as a loyal junior partner in British and American efforts to crush national independence movements in Asia. Australian troops were sent to Korea, the Malay “emergency” and Borneo, and carried out a significant combat role in Vietnam.

Ideologically, the Australian ruling class sought to harness popular support for this policy by combining Cold War anti-communism with “White Australia” racism. The continent, it was argued, was threatened by Asian nations to the north. Involvement in the Vietnam War and the 1965 introduction of conscription were justified on the basis that these initiatives would prevent the Chinese “communist yellow peril” from sweeping down through South-East Asia and eventually reaching Australia. This racist outlook was particularly promoted in the military and continues, to a certain extent, to this day.

The late 1960s saw opposition to the barbaric US war in Vietnam swell into a mass protest movement. In 1972, the Labor party was swept into government, in part on the basis of promises to end Australia's involvement and abolish conscription, which it did immediately upon assuming office. While the US alliance was retained, broad public sentiment against taking part in any future US-led wars forced the Australian ruling class to adhere to a military policy bordering on isolationism. Until Timor, no government had felt it politically possible to involve Australia in a large-scale military engagement overseas.

A great deal has changed in Australia since the early 1970s, but the military, to a certain extent, has stagnated. Recruitment into the volunteer

force was affected by the general indifference with which most youth viewed the institution. A disproportionate number of military recruits come from Australia's regional cities and rural towns, which have suffered economic decline since the early 1980s. Moreover, the military's racist traditions have ensured the majority of recruits have Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, despite the enormous demographic changes brought about by the high levels of immigration to Australia since World War II from all corners of the globe.

Behind the political and media scrutiny of the professionalism, efficiency and ideological conceptions within the armed forces lies a shift in foreign policy. While the military remains heavily influenced by the old Cold War ideology, the ruling class is preoccupied with the changing political relations that have emerged since the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago.

The Australian government's decision to deploy 5,000 troops to East Timor in September 1999 marked a turning point. Acting to a large degree independently of the US and other major powers, Australia sent troops to East Timor to shore up its claims to oil and gas resources in the Timor sea and its broader strategic interests. The Howard government's ideological justification for deploying the largest number of troops since Vietnam was not couched in Cold War rhetoric or “the threat from Asia”. Rather, like other imperialist interventions such as NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, it was defended on humanitarian grounds—to protect the East Timorese from the pro-Indonesian militia. The various middle class radical groups called for “troops in,” lending support to the government and the propaganda in the mainstream press.

The government's new defence doctrine, published in December, confirmed that the Timor operation marked the open turn to a policy of neo-colonialism under the banner of protecting stability and human rights. The report foreshadowed further military deployments in South East Asia and the South Pacific, wherever Australian capitalism's substantial economic and strategic interests are threatened by political instability. The new American secretary of state, Colin Powell, reinforced the change of orientation in January when he signalled that the Bush administration expected Australia to represent US interests in the crisis-stricken Indonesian archipelago.

In relation to training within the armed forces, it is likely that little will change. Some officers and other ranks may be drummed out, and the more sadistic aspects of discipline and training modified. But the military will continue to use the long-tested methods developed over more than a century of fighting imperialist wars.

What will definitely change, however, is the military's public image. An armed forces that is seen to tacitly condone bashings and foster racism and backwardness does not square with the humanitarian profile the government is seeking to advance, particularly when soldiers abuse the very people they are meant to be rescuing.

The government has increased the defence budget and plans to enlarge the military in line with its new orientation. A major recruitment drive is underway, using footage from East Timor, to promote the military as an essential institution and a worthwhile occupation. Advertisements are targeting the major urban centres in an effort to recruit the more highly educated personnel required to operate increasingly sophisticated equipment.

The public campaign against “rough justice” is a central part of this process.



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