DEFENCE POLICY AND THE DEATH OF PRIVATE MANNING

Ron Smith raises questions about New Zealand's military involvement in East Timor.

The circumstances of the killing of New Zealand private Leonard Manning in East Timor last year raised many more questions than were answered (or even addressed) in the report of the official Army inquiry released last November. These questions go right to the heart of a crucial issue for New Zealand as far as its defence forces are concerned. Will we resolve properly to support such forces as we send overseas or will we continue to send them anyway?

New Zealand has a long tradition of sending overseas forces that are inadequately trained and inadequately equipped, which, as a consequence, suffer additional and avoidable casualties. To judge by the evidence thrown up by the Manning case we are still in traditional mode. Notwithstanding some recent expressions of good intentions (to buy radios and armoured personnel carriers, for example), we are still attempting to discharge our defence obligations on the cheap.

The time is long overdue that we curb our enthusiasm for good causes until we are prepared properly to support the armed forces that we send to promote them. If the sad death of Private Manning achieves nothing else, it should cause us seriously to review the way we support the military and to face some hard questions.

It is common to blame New Zealand losses at Gallipoli on Winston Churchill and the incompetence of British generals. However, historians have long identified poor training and leadership as a significant factor here.[1] Certainly the New Zealand forces that fought in Europe in the Second World War were sent with major deficiencies in all areas. They were inadequately prepared and poorly led. How could it have been otherwise, when many units saw for the first time the major pieces of military equipment they would use when they arrived in theatre, and when the permanent force from which the 20,000 plus 2nd New Zealand Division was formed numbered only a few hundred just a year before? As a consequence, they suffered a rude awakening in Greece and Crete.[2]

When it came to the Korean War deployment there was no shortage of experienced men (and artillery pieces), but Kayforce still descended on the peninsula like a plague of locusts as they sought amongst their Allies the essential equipment for fighting a war in the rigorous climate of Korea. Apart from defective vehicles and communications equipment, they were short of warm clothing and suitable boots.[3]

The New Zealand peacekeeping force sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 is now widely recognised to have been inadequately equipped and very fortunate not to have had this vulnerability exploited. It is, of course, precisely the same inadequate transport and radios (to name but two items) that have now been deployed to East Timor (and, in the case of the former, are sitting immobile and useless in front of base headquarters). A brief flurry of enthusiasm for re-equipping the New Zealand Army (at the expense of the Navy and the Air Force) will not solve the problem. It requires a fundamental change of attitude.

If we are going to continue to offer forces to international humanitarian operations, or in defence of our more general interests (maritime security, for example), we need to have a continuing commitment to a modern defence force. If we are not prepared to make and sustain such a commitment, we should make this plain to our neighbours and international partners. We should not continue the disreputable practice of willing the ends (protection of democracy, human rights, maritime commerce) with-

Private Leonard Manning

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The death of Private Manning raises, yet again, important questions about the level of support and protection provided for members of the New Zealand armed forces who are sent overseas. Persistent parsimony over many years has meant that we have regularly dispatched forces that were inadequately prepared and equipped. Private Manning may be just the latest in a regrettable tradition. We have too often willed the ends (protection of human rights, defence of our interests) without willing the means (adequately supported and equipped forces). It may be time that this deficiency was officially acknowledged and that we stopped sending forces anywhere until we have resolved properly to provide for them.

out providing the means (properly trained, equipped and supported military forces).

Official reluctance

There has been a persistent official reluctance to provide information about the circumstances in which Private Manning met his death. Newspaper reports around the time gave conflicting and inconsistent accounts of the incident, and the official report (as reflected in the media) really concealed more than it revealed. Of course, there are sometimes legitimate justifications for withholding information. Revealing details of tactics and capabilities could prejudice the security of those still serving in East Timor. However, what is publicly known about the events of the Manning shooting suggests that in this case the motivation is just as likely to have been to obscure embarrassing facts and generally protect those responsible from disagreeable questions.

The following account of the incident is thus largely based on media reports reflecting both official and unofficial sources. Even those aspects of the story that appear to be officially promoted raise interesting questions about the capability of the New Zealand Defence Force to achieve its objectives and protect its personnel.

According to the official version, Private Manning was part of a small patrol that came under fire from an East Timorese militia group. He was almost immediately fatally struck. The rest of the patrol withdrew but not before ascertaining that Manning was, indeed, dead. The patrol then made contact with base and waited for reinforcements.

Private Manning's body was recovered some five hours later. At this point it was ascertained that he had a shoulder wound and a wound at the back of the head. It was also seen that he had other injuries. His throat had been cut and his ears removed. Medics are cited in the official report as 'confirming' that death had been immediate (from the head wound) and that the other injuries had been inflicted after death.[4]

Critical questions

Reports at the time of the incident (24 July 2000) indicate that some time elapsed before the rest of the patrol contacted base. Some reports also cast doubt on how orderly the withdrawal might have been and how much other members of the patrol actually knew about the fate of Manning. Leaving that issue aside, we might ask why

A haka is performed at Private Manning's funeral in Te Kauwhata on 29 July 2000

there was any delay before contact was made with headquarters? Could it be that the antiquated radio equipment was predictably ineffectual in the difficult terrain of East Timor?

The fact that it seems to have taken five hours for support to arrive also raises serious questions. Clearly, helicopters were not available, although there were Iroquois in theatre. In fact, no strictly military transportation (Unimogs, APCs) seems to have been available at all.[5] The support force seems to have made its way forward crammed on two small vehicles.

None of this seems to be in the official report but (if true) it does raise some important questions. What would have been the situation if there had been wounded and/or the rest of the patrol had been pinned down by hostile fire? Would it still have taken five hours to get there? It is hard not to contrast this with what would have been the situation if (say) a patrol of American infantrymen had come under fire in the same way. Would not they have been in contact with their base within minutes? And would not that contact have been followed very shortly after by the appearance in the skies of something very nasty indeed? And would not this immediate air support have provided the possibility of employing suppressing-fire on the adversary and of ascertaining whether there were wounded and, if there were, removing them?

Dangerous places

Do New Zealand peacekeepers deployed to do humanitarian work in dangerous places deserve any less than the level of support available to US soldiers in like circumstances? It may be countered here that we cannot afford to keep up with the United States. There is some truth in this. But we could and should make a better effort than we have. In the terrain of East Timor, helicopter support should have been available. Indeed, should have been standing by.

Then there is the matter of the size of the patrol. Why was a force of half a dozen sent to shadow and possibly come into conflict with an adversary force that was known to be well equipped and at least twice its size? Media reports suggest that the New Zealand patrol was the size it was because of 'illness and leave'.[6] With several hundred soldiers deployed to East Timor it is hard to understand how a full-strength unit or replacements from elsewhere could not have been available for this particular mission.

On the other hand, if a particular operation cannot be adequately staffed, perhaps it should not be undertaken at all. So why was it undertaken? Particularly, why did the operation continue the following morning when it was clear that the adversary was in greater strength? The official report is silent on all these things. This is particularly unsatisfactory since it is clear that mistakes were made. The commander of B Company (Private Manning's company), after returning from East Timor, said as much to Morning Report: 'we learnt from our m . . . [istakes] . . . changed tactics'.[7]

It is noteworthy (and regrettable) that the East Timor deployment is continuing on the basis of rapidly re-training other specialties as infantrymen and through the increasing use of reservists. Perhaps the explanation as to why an under-strength patrol was sent lies in a long-established New Zealand military culture of making do. We have sometimes been tempted to make a virtue of this ('kiwi can do'). For over a hundred years it has been a dangerous illusion that has killed New Zealand soldiers from the Boer War onwards. Whatever its justification in the past, this is not a satisfactory basis for military operations in the twenty-first century.

Crucial issue

All of this is to accept the official version of events in its entirety. A crucial issue, of course, is whether or not Private Manning died instantly from gunshot wounds. According to media reports of the official inquiry findings, this fact was 'confirmed by medics who examined Private Manning's body in the bush and a New Zealand pathologist'. As far as the former are concerned, it is very doubtful whether 'medics' on the scene and dealing with four wounds could make a secure judgment about the cause and time of death. On the other hand, if the opinion of the New Zealand pathologist is the opinion of a pathologist who had performed an autopsy, then there can be little ground for doubt. It would be clear that the gunshot wounds had been received simultaneously, that they had been instantly fatal and that the mutilations reported had been inflicted after death.

Without certainty on this point, a whole clutch of interesting questions arises. Certainly, if he were only wounded at this stage it would have been very difficult for his comrades to know this with any confidence without actually getting to him and we know this was not done. He may have been still and not making any noise, but he may not have been dead.

In view of what happened next, this possibility is a very worrying one. In the circumstances, there would have been little that his fellow soldiers or the East Timor force could have done for him. With the adversary holding the high ground and in superior numbers, it would have been contrary to operational procedures and perhaps very risky for the four or five remaining members of the patrol to attempt a rescue or even make sure of his condition. All the more reason then for not operating in small and very isolated formations and, apparently, far from any support. It is a crucially important component of fighting efficiency and unit morale that soldiers who are downed have the assurance of help. Indeed, there is an almost universal tradition of providing that help and very often at considerable risk.

A New Zealand armoured personnel carrier in East Timor

The official army inquiry found that nothing could have been done to prevent Private Manning's death. This would have been some comfort to Private Manning's family and that is not an unimportant consideration. Private Manning's family deserves our sympathy and respect but there are wider issues that must be considered, in the interests of future 'Private Mannings' as much as defence accountability. On the face of it, the Army's claim is patently false. There were things that could have been done, both around the time of his death and in the years that led up to it. It would be a greater service to the late Private Manning and his family to face up to these things rather than sweep them under the carpet. It may be that a completely independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding Private Manning's death would provide a more useful and a more fitting tribute.

Soldiers of Victor Company, 1RNZIR, on patrol in East Timor

NOTES

1. See, eg, James Rolfe, *The Armed Forces of New Zealand* (St Leonards, 1999), p.7.
2. Ewan Jamieson, 'The High Cost of Parsimony', *NZ Defence Quarterly*, Winter 1994, p.16.
3. Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War, Volume II: Combat Operations* (Auckland, 1996), pp.62–3.
4. NZPA, 27 Nov 2000 (http://www.knowledgebasket.co.nz).
5. It would be interesting to know how useful the new LAVs would have been in the terrain where the Manning incident took place had they been available?
6. *Evening Post,* 26 Dec 2000.
7. Maj Evan Williams, Radio NZ, Morning Report, 10 Nov 2000.