



1st Battalion The Royal Australian Regiment Association

1RAR Association Submission to Defence Honours and Awards Appeal Tribunal regarding recognition for service in Somalia by the 1RAR Group

Introduction

The Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (DHAAT) has been directed to inquire into and report on recognition of Australian Defence Force (ADF) units that served in Somalia between 1992 and 1995. The Tribunal is 'to examine relevant evidence and consider whether it is appropriate that any Australian units that served in Somalia be awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation (MUC) or another form of further recognition for service'.

This submission is made by the 1st Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) Association. The submission seeks recognition for the 1RAR Battalion Group (1RAR Group) that deployed to Somalia in December 1992 and returned in May 1993. The submission seeks the award of the MUC based upon the contention that the 1RAR Group provided sustained outstanding service during the deployment.

Background to the Inquiry

Contemporary Methods of Recognition

Australian service personnel received honours and awards under the Imperial system until February 1975 when the Government introduced the Australian system. The two systems – the Imperial and the Australian; then operated in parallel until October 1992 when the Government announced that Australia would no longer make recommendations for Imperial awards:

Her Majesty The Queen has indicated her view that it is appropriate that Australian citizens should be recognised exclusively by the Australian system of honours ... accordingly I have consulted with the Premiers of States and we have agreed that

*Australian Governments, both State and Commonwealth, will henceforth cease to make recommendations for British honours...*¹

Gallantry Decorations and Distinguished Service Decorations Regulations were introduced in 1991 to recognise individual acts of gallantry in action or distinguished command, leadership or performance of duties in warlike operations. The Defence Commendation scheme also commenced in 1991 to recognise outstanding or exceptional achievement for which awards within the Australian Honours System were not an appropriate form of recognition. Group commendations consist of a certificate only, no badge is issued to individuals.

Australian Unit Citations were created for the purpose of 'officially recognising occasions when a unit as a whole and each member individually performs to an outstanding degree either in a single action or operation or over time'.² The Unit Citation for Gallantry and the MUC were introduced into the Australian honours system in 1991. The citations were established for the purpose of recognising gallantry in action or outstanding service in warlike operations by units of the Australian Defence Force.

Recognition of the 1 RAR Group and Individuals

Significantly, the 1RAR Group was the first operational deployment of an ADF organisation of unit strength since Australia's withdrawal from the Vietnam war almost 20 years previously, and the first group to be eligible for recognition under the auspices of the newly created Australian system.

On 23 November 1993 following the Group's return to Australia, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) approved the award of a CGS Commendation to the 1RAR Group. As previously stated, this award did not provide recognition of individuals who had participated in the deployment as part of the Group.

In 2006 the issue of individual recognition was pursued by Army and considered by the Army Meritorious Unit Citation Committee. Following this consideration, in 2007 the Chief of Army nominated the 1RAR Group for the MUC for sustained outstanding service in 1992-93 in Somalia. The nomination was rejected by the Chief of the Defence Force on the basis that the MUC was not intended to be awarded retrospectively and also acting on the advice of the Vice Chief of the Defence Force that such award would create precedent. No merits review of the 1RAR Group's performance was conducted.

In 2009 the newly established Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal was directed to inquire into the eligibility of 1RAR Group for a unit citation for its service in Somalia, review the merits of establishing a campaign medal for this service and review eligibility for Royal Australian Navy units for service in conjunction with the deployment. The report of the Inquiry found no error in due process leading to the award of the CGS Commendation and the Tribunal panel did not consider the unit had provided sustained outstanding service.

¹ Prime Minister of Australia Media Release 111/92 dated 5 October 1992

² Department of Defence DM 87/38684 to PM&C Honours and Awards Interdepartmental Committee dated 13 October 1987.

Again, no merits review of the 1RAR Group's performance was conducted and the criteria for the MUC was not analysed or reviewed.

Retrospectivity

Over the past decade, Defence has maintained a view that retrospective recognition was inappropriate. The DHAAT has considered this position in various individual reviews and inquiries and has consistently refuted the position. It also concluded that the honours system would not be threatened by the award of a unit citation retrospectively. In 2018 Defence gave evidence at the Inquiry into Unit Recognition for the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam that it would support retrospective recognition if DHAAT was to recommend a citation.³ Subsequently a unit citation was awarded retrospectively.

Criteria and the Merits Review

The MUC is not listed or defined in the Defence Act 1903. Defence provides guidance on the nomination process and eligibility for citations in the Honours and Awards Manual. 'Sustained outstanding service' is not explained, the guidance simply states that 'the MUC may be awarded for sustained outstanding service'. DHAAT has previously indicated that this Defence guidance is 'largely unhelpful'.⁴ In the absence of adequate policy guidance and noting that the conditions for the award of the MUC were broad, DHAAT has previously determined that it was critical for it to examine the conditions and decide what elements should be considered in assessing a unit's performance.

DHAAT noted that Australian Unit Citations were under consideration by an Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) as part of the Australian system of honours and awards in 1984. In a letter from Defence to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Defence stated:

There are occasions when a unit as a whole and each member individually performs so outstandingly, either in a single action or operation or over a period of time, that some form of official recognition of all members of the unit is warranted. In such situations, while individual awards for gallantry in action or for distinguished service in operations might be completely justified, given the mutual interdependence basic to any unit it would be inappropriate if all members were not recognised.

...

The Defence view is that there would be considerable merit in having the facility within the Australian system of honours and awards for citing a unit as a whole for outstanding service and for such a citation to entitle members of the unit at the time to wear distinctive insignia. Two citations are proposed:

a. the Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry for extraordinary gallantry in action; and

³ Director of Defence Honours and Awards, Oral submission, Public Hearing, Nowra, 13 October 2017.

⁴ Report of the Inquiry into *Recognition for Service with 547 Signal Troop in Vietnam from 1966 to 1971* dated 7 May 2015, p.61.

b. the Australian Meritorious Unit Citation for outstanding service over a period in operations.⁵

Taking this as the start point, DHAAT developed conditions for the award of the MUC to enable a merits review in the Inquiry into Unit Recognition for the Royal Australian Helicopter Flight Vietnam. These conditions were not contested or disputed by Defence and were used to conduct the merits review of the unit's performance.

DHAAT considered that, for a unit's performance to be 'sustained', it would need to demonstrate that it had maintained its performance continuously; that it had created an enduring and conspicuous impact on the operation of which it was a part; and that it had successfully completed its mission in warlike operations. It considered that a unit's operations would need to be continuous and without break. Whilst individuals may have been rested, the unit would need to be continuously engaged in the operation. DHAAT considered that 'outstanding' should remain a subjective and discretionary test with the governing consideration focussed on whether a unit could be seen to have performed with distinction or been conspicuous. Most significantly, DHAAT said that a unit would need to demonstrate that its performance set it apart from other similar units or units engaged on the operation, or the unit created an effect and achieved results which were clearly beyond what was expected when the unit deployed. It concluded that evidence of high levels of equipment and personnel availability throughout the operation would provide support to the assessment of 'sustained' outstanding service.

We submit that these endorsed conditions should be used to conduct a merits review of the performance of the 1RAR Group in Somalia and turn now to that review.

Deployment Background

In 1993, 1RAR and assigned attachments deployed to Somalia on Operation SOLACE as the 1RAR Group. The deployment was conducted over the period 24 December 1992 to 14 May 1993 – four months. The 1 RAR Group deployed as part of the United States led, United Nations endorsed, multi-national peacemaking United Task Force (UNITAF) as part of Operation RESTORE HOPE.

The 1RAR Group was assigned the Humanitarian Relief Sector (HRS) Baidoa. This area of operations was central to Somalia and to Operation RESTORE HOPE. The HRS was 17,000 sq km in size and Baidoa was referred to in the Western press at the time as the 'City of Death'. It was reportedly "the region worst affected by warlordism (sic) and hunger." (Zaalberg p. 201)

The 1 RAR Group assumed operational responsibility for HRS Baidoa at 0001 hrs 19 January 1993 and ceased operations in HRS Baidoa on 14 May 1993. Redeployment of the 1 RAR Group to Australia concluded when the final elements departed theatre on 20 May 1993.

⁵ Defence Position Paper on Honours and Awards, DOD DM84/8966 to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet dated 26 March 1984.

In a media release on 25 June 2021, then Minister for Veterans Affairs Darren Chester MP noted that “In late 1992 a humanitarian disaster, which was compounded by a complete breakdown in civil order, plunged Somalia into chaos and in response Australia deployed forces from all three Services to the Unified Task Force – Somalia (UNITAF) arriving in January 1993”.

Operation SOLACE demonstrated the ADF’s ability to deploy a potent force halfway around the world at short notice. This was particularly significant given the 20 years since this had been achieved and the first significant test of ADF combat capability since Vietnam.

Operation SOLACE reaffirmed that the quality of personnel, procedures and equipment was comparable, and often acknowledged as superior, to those of other Nations who participated in Operation RESTORE HOPE.

Evidence

Evidence is provided against the criteria for the MUC used in the Inquiry into Unit Recognition for the Royal Australian Navy Helicopter Flight Vietnam. All of the evidence presented is from firsthand accounts, the post operation reports and some publications including academic papers published since.

Warlike Operations

The deployment was declared as a warlike operation pursuant to Australian Active Service Medal Regulation 3. by the Governor General on 13 December 1996.

Mission Achievement

1RAR Group’s mission was ‘to provide a secure environment for the distribution of humanitarian relief aid in Humanitarian Relief Sector – Baidoa’. Evidence of mission achievement is contained in the CGS Commendation citation dated 23 November 1993 which states 1RAR Group “not only achieved its mission but sought to re-establish the basis of the civil infrastructure”. The Commendation goes on to say, “I commend the Battalion Group for its success in this operation”.

It is important to contextualise the situation with respect to achievement of the mission. The mission was achieved despite significant adverse physical and climatic conditions; the actions of a determined and capable enemy who were largely employed by Non-Government Organisations (NGO) by day and took up arms against the Group by night; a significant deficit of operational support, especially aviation assets for a 17,000 sq km area of operations (AO), in particular aeromedical evacuation capability; and a significant lack of strategic logistic support that was a consequence of the limited resupply from Australia. The resupply issues particularly involved a shortage of replacements for the track-link that the M113 armoured personnel carriers required. This further exacerbated the mobility problems around the HRS. In this circumstance, mission achievement is made even more significant by the outstanding improvised repair efforts of workshops that became necessary due to the lack of repair parts.

Enduring Effect

The 1RAR Group had a lasting effect on HRS Baidoa. The most compelling evidence of this is the number of publications that noted the contribution of Australia in HRS Baidoa years after the Group departed Somalia. The locals of the Bai Region also lobbied very hard to keep the Australians in the region. This was reiterated in stories carried to Australia by interpreters who were later moved to Australia.

Professionally, the enduring nature of the contribution to Operation RESTORE HOPE is most often acknowledged by the extent to which the 1RAR Group went to restore civil affairs. The legacy of the 1RAR Group was to enable the people of the Bai region to be able to live by the rule of law and not by the barrel of a gun after the 1RAR Group's departure.

Conspicuous Impact, Outstanding Performance and 'Set Apart'

The widely acknowledged professionalism of Australian soldiers led to the HRS assigned to the 1RAR Group being one of the key sectors and in central Somalia with an airfield that served to resupply a large part of Somalia and several other national forces in surrounding HRS. It was acknowledged that the 1RAR Group did a better job of securing this area than other forces who were assigned to UNITAF.

The CGS Commendation makes it clear that "The Battalion Group's method of operation and activities were acclaimed by the HQ UNITAF, the local population, and non-governmental agencies". The Commendation records that "The praise which the Battalion Group rightly earned is testament to its collective skill and to the resourcefulness and professionalism of its members".

The rapid deployment of the Ready Battalion Group over the Christmas leave period of 1992/93 was also a significant achievement on its own. The expertise and experience to conduct such a deployment of a Battalion Group had largely faded since Vietnam through 'the long peace'. The 1RAR Group's work over the Christmas break of 1992/93 despite the reduced tempo of normal Defence and ADF operations. Unsupported decision making by commanders and leaders was outstanding. The 1RAR Group was warned for overseas service on 16 December and was complete in Somalia just over one month later by mid-January 1993. This was and remains, unprecedented for such a large and diverse force.

High Equipment and Personnel Availability

The 1RAR Group experienced a high rate of equipment and personnel availability despite circumstances which were not conducive to either. The ability to deploy additional and replacement equipment and stores, or to send back to Australia personnel for medical or compassionate reasons, was very limited. Bob Breen's book 'A Little Bit of Hope' describes the problems presented by the logistic system and was studied at Australian Command and Staff College for several years after. The lessons from the deployment to Somalia were applied to change many aspects of the logistic resupply system for support to operations.

The 1RAR Group experienced a tenuous and inadequate supply line to Australia but managed to maintain high levels of equipment availability in theatre through improvisation

and judicious employment of essential equipment. There were limited ADF resupply flights to Somalia from Australia and in many cases, the prioritisation of equipment and stores for dispatch from Australia to Somalia on those flights did not conform to the requests made by the 1RAR Group.

A good example of innovation and improvisation was the operations of the 1RAR Transport Platoon. The lack of aviation assets available to the 1RAR Group and issues over the lack of replacement M113 APC track link, meant the transport platoon worked tirelessly and in difficult and hazardous circumstances to execute NGO convoy protection tasks and resupply operations over the 17,000 sq km HRS. The Transport Platoon Commander was awarded a CDF Commendation for his distinguished performance of duties. Unfortunately, his soldiers were not recognised for their individual efforts.

Individual availability remained extremely high throughout the deployment. Four individuals were swapped out to give these individuals who had only just been posted into 1RAR, appropriate experience to support the development of lessons for what could be the only major deployment for many years to come, noting the last deployment of this size was for the Vietnam war. Only a handful of soldiers were replaced for medical or compassionate reasons despite the very short notice provided for the operation.

Sustained Operations

The 1RAR Group executed sustained operations over a 17-week period of very intense operations. Intensity of operations were deliberately very high for the initial eight weeks, with soldiers receiving little rest, while establishing a strong 1RAR Group presence in the HRS in the early stages of the operation. The intensity of operations thereafter was in large part due to the expectation that to achieve the mission, the 1RAR Group would need to work particularly hard knowing that by mid-May 1993, the Group would return to Australia. It was generally accepted in theatre that physical and mental recovery of individuals and the unit would occur upon return to Australia.

Two factors enabled and created the need for high tempo operations. The first was night vision equipment which proved invaluable and was used extensively during patrols at night. Whilst this was a significant advantage, the downside was that operations became constant and for 24 hours per day. As this was the first significant Australian combat contribution since the Vietnam War, the use of night vision goggles was not well practiced. The 1RAR Group employed most of the night vision equipment available in Australia, even some which were of Vietnam War vintage and were taken from museums. The Somalis referred to the soldiers of the 1RAR Group as 'ants' as soldiers appeared to be everywhere all the time and especially at night. Night was when NGO guards turned into the enemy.

The second factor was the employment of the M113 APCs which were the main method of protected movement for patrolling large distances and were used extensively throughout the HRS. In four months, they covered approximately 170,000 km (equating to more than 12 months of training kilometres in Australia).

To support its mission, the 1 RAR Group operated on continuous company tasking based on a nine-day cycle of 12 company group rotations over the 17-week deployment. Company tasks included:

- patrolling in the far reaches of the HRS, mounted in APCs,
- convoy protection of NGO relief operations,
- urban patrolling in the Baidoa township, and
- security of Baidoa Airfield.

In addition to these continuous operations, the following unit coordinated tasks were conducted:

- four battalion (minus) operations;
- four company cordon and search operations;
- continuous airfield security operations for the period of the deployment; and
- continuous logistics support to the 1 RAR Group provided by the Battalion Support Group for the period of the deployment.

Post the operation, analysis revealed that the 1 RAR Group had conducted:

- over 1000 foot patrols,
- engaged in 19 contacts with the enemy of which 11 were conducted at section level or above,
- conducted numerous sniping engagements, and
- confiscated or captured 986 weapons of various types.

Enemy casualties included seven killed in action, four wounded in action and 70 prisoners were handed over to the locally re-established Somali Auxiliary Security Force.

There was no break and no relief of the 1RAR Group of its responsibility for HRS Baidoa until the Group was relieved-in-place by French forces before return to Australia.

Conclusion

The 1RAR Group deployed on Operation SOLACE in January 1993 as Australia's contribution to the United States led, United Nations endorsed, Operation RESTORE HOPE. The 1RAR Group was a key force element of the United Task Force (UNITAF). The Group comprised of B Squadron 3rd/4th Cavalry Regiment, elements of 4th Field Regiment, 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment, 3rd Brigade Administrative Support Battalion and members of other units within the 1st Division. The 1RAR Group assumed responsibility for HRS Baidoa to provide a secure environment for the distribution of humanitarian relief aid. The mission was achieved successfully despite the most adverse physical and climatic conditions and the actions of a determined and capable enemy. The Group engaged in numerous contacts at section level and above and was at the end of a 17 000 km tenuous and fragile supply line. Despite this the 1RAR Group received both national and international praise for its operational ability in achieving its mission. The Group received high praise for the tangible efforts and results

achieved in seeking to re-establish the basis of civil infrastructure in its Humanitarian Relief Sector. Due to the Group's operational techniques, tactics and procedures being so successful, they were adopted as models to be used by other national contingents in Somalia.

The collective skills, resourcefulness, and professionalism of the 1 RAR Group to successfully accomplish the mission, was outstanding and in keeping with the finest traditions of the Australian Army and Australian Defence Force.

In every respect, the performance of the Group was sustained and outstanding. The individuals who participated in the operation deserve to be recognised – the award of the MUC will achieve this long overdue recognition.



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Attachment 1 – References Relating to 1RAR Group Achievements

Attachment 1

References Relating to 1RAR Group Achievements

1. Breen, Bob ‘A Little Bit of Hope – Australian Force Somalia 1993”
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