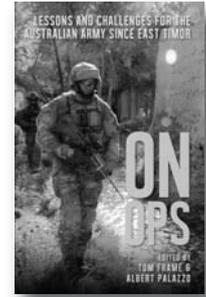


## BOOK REVIEW

# *On ops: lessons and challenges for the Australian Army since East Timor*

edited by Tom Frame and Albert Palazzo

*NewSouth Books: Sydney; 2016; 304 pp.; ISBN 9781742235097 (paperback);  
RRP \$39.99*



When the Cold War ended in 1990, no one could (or did) predict that over the next 25 years Australian Army personnel would be deployed to Somalia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Bougainville, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Solomon Islands. After decades of inactivity and the 'long peace' of the post-Vietnam War era, the Australian Army was stretched to its limits and forced to adapt and overcome numerous challenges. This book reflects on lessons from this broad-ranging experience.

In fact, *On Ops* critically examines the transformation that has taken place in the Australian Army since troops were deployed to East Timor in 1999. The book addresses the issues from a range of perspectives including: politics and policy, strategy and tactics, intelligence and logistics, health care and ethics. Contributors include John Howard, David Horner, Peter Leahy, Amin Saikal, Craig Stockings and John Blaxland. The book is divided into five parts entitled: The Bigger Picture; Views from the Other Side of the Hill; Operational and Ready?; Views from the Media; and, On Ethics and Morality. Tom Frame provides an Introduction; John Blaxland provides a Final Assessments chapter; and Al Palazzo a Post-script. *On Ops* is based on the proceedings from the Australian Centre for the Study of Armed Conflict and Society (ACSACS) conference of the same name and conducted in partnership with the Australian Army's Modernisation and Strategic Planning Branch in June 2015.

Established in 2012, ACSACS is a University of New South Wales Canberra Research Centre at the Australian Defence Force Academy. It aspires to become the pre-eminent Australian venue for assessing the past, present and likely future impact of armed conflicts on institutions and individuals in order to enhance public policy and raise community awareness through multi-disciplinary scholarship. This book goes some way to establish its credentials in this capacity.

One of its strong features is its breadth of subject-matter experts. Amin Saikal, for instance, in a blunt assessment, notes that "the war on terror has failed to stamp out the scourge of violent extremism in the [Middle East] region and beyond"; and that "the Australian Government needs to realise that military actions on their own cannot bring security and stability to the Middle East". Rueben Bowd emphasises the need for cultural sensitivity and the importance of securing local goodwill and support for a mission where success is measured in political and social terms, and highlights the importance of identifying "the right personnel, with the right skill-sets, to perform vital forward facing roles at the right time". Tom

Frame questions whether young men and women serving in the Army in places where there has been a collapse of civil order have had their 'moral compass' damaged. John Blaxland observes that the Army has managed to balance the desire for reform with resource uncertainty and strategic unpredictability. David Horner concludes that "the challenge for contemporary policy makers is to craft a new defence policy that draws on the vast experience gained from these 15 years of operations but not to be confined by it".

But, as Tom Frame recognises, how much these 'insights' are accurate and relevant for the future will only ever be known in hindsight. *On Ops* usefully identifies several challenges 'yet to negotiate' including: the redundancy of capabilities in the specialised brigades; cultural understanding and knowledge of our region; cyber war; increasingly urban and lethal operating environments; and the mechanism for the Australian Army to become a true 'learning organisation'. As ever, it will befall experienced and open minded leaders to balance past experiences against potential futures and to continue to develop capability in the quest for 'victory' at an 'acceptable cost'.

Tom Frame served as a naval officer for 15 years before being ordained to the Anglican ministry. He served as Bishop to the Australian Defence Force from 2001-2007 and is the author/editor of 28 books on a range of topics including the ethics of armed conflict. He is a regular media commentator on naval, religious and ethical affairs. Albert Palazzo is the director of Research for the Australian Army. He has published widely on the history of the Australian Army including: *The Australian Army: A History of its Organisation, 1901-2001*; *Moltke to bin Laden: The Relevance of Doctrine in Contemporary Military Environment*; and *The Future of War Debate in Australia*. His recent research has focused on the effects of resource limits and climate change on the future character of war.

*On Ops* includes a list of acronyms, and the notes from each paper are included at the end of the book. Disappointingly, there is no index which would allow referencing to a particular issue.

The editors state that they hope *On Ops* will "prompt discussion and provoke debate about what the Army can glean from its recent experience and how that learning should be absorbed and reflected in the way the Army goes about its business both now and into the future". To this end, *On Ops* is relevant to all military practitioners, as well as those who analyse military operations.

**Marcus Fielding**