



### The compulsory call-out of Army reservists in January 2020

As detailed on p. 7, on 3 January 2020, Senator the Honourable Linda Reynolds CSC, Minister for Defence, herself an Army Reserve brigadier, announced that the National Security Committee of Cabinet had recommended, and the Governor-General had approved, the compulsory call-out of up to 3000 Army reservists from the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Brigades to play a key role in Operation Bushfire Assist 2019-20.

The Minister stressed that the compulsory call-out powers had never been invoked previously, but she did not explain why it was necessary to invoke them on this occasion. Given that it is expected that some reservists will deploy voluntarily on all operations and that this call-out was well short of a call-out of all reservists, the Minister's announcement led to speculation that the compulsory call-out may have been motivated by factors other than operational necessity.

While I am not privy to the National Security Committee's deliberations, I can think of several reasons why a compulsory call-out might have been necessary for this particular operation:

- the Army Reserve's standing commitment for immediate voluntary call-out under Army's three-year readiness cycle (Plan Beersheba) is only one battalion group, whereas it was assessed that three brigade groups were needed urgently on this occasion;
- there likely was a desire, indeed a necessity given the urgency, to call out complete formation headquarters, units and sub-units rather than individual volunteers from which *ad hoc* headquarters, units and sub-units could be formed;
- there were already many Army reservists fighting the fires or providing disaster relief in their civilian capacities as firefighters, police officers, emergency services staff, hospital medical staff, Red Cross workers and the like, and these personnel would have to be exempted from the compulsory call-out, reducing the pool of reservists available;
- there were probably some reservists already on full-time service at home and/or deployed on operations abroad, reducing further the pool of reservists immediately available for voluntary call out; and
- there would be a need to have employers release their reservist employees for full-time service urgently.

This crisis also may have been seen as a good opportunity to evaluate the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of the relatively-new call-out powers under the *Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act 2001*. Indeed, a combination of the above reasons may well have informed the decision. Let us consider the matter in more detail.

Most of the Army Reserve is split between the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, which, inter alia, contains five light infantry brigades (4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Victoria; 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, New South

Wales; 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade, South Australia and Tasmania; 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Queensland; and 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Western Australia) and Special Forces Command which contains the 1<sup>st</sup> Commando Regiment. The five light-infantry brigades, between them, provide three *ad hoc* light-infantry battalion groups, known as battle groups, each year to reinforce the Regular Army's three combat brigades under a reset (individual training), readying (collective training), and ready (immediately deployable) three-year cycle, such that one of the three battle groups is available for operational deployment at short notice at any time.

These 'reinforcing battle groups' have a strength of around 800 – 1000 personnel so, if the 'ready' battle group alone had been called out, it would have provided, at best, a third of the troops estimated to be needed for this operation. Further, it would come without a formation headquarters which would be needed as the basis for a joint task force headquarters.

Secondly, while reserve brigade headquarters have not been employed on warfighting operations since World War II, there is established precedent for employing them successfully to command and control disaster relief operations at home. An example is Operation Victoria Bushfire Assist in February 2009 when Headquarters 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which is Victoria-based, managed the disaster response. In the 2020 bushfire response, it was assessed, quite reasonably, that three of the five reserve brigade headquarters would be needed to manage state-based responses in their respective jurisdictions. The responses needed to be state-based because, within the Australian federation, the respective state emergency services have the powers and responsibility to combat bushfires and provide disaster relief. The ADF's role is to assist, within its capabilities and capacity, as requested by the states.

Further, as with all ADF joint operations, the three brigade commanders, in their capacity as joint task force commanders, would work to, and be co-ordinated by, Headquarters Joint Operations Command at Bungendore, where a two-star officer, Major General Justin Ellwood, had been appointed in December to co-ordinate Operation Bushfire Assist. General Ellwood would draw on resources from across the ADF as needed to enable the three state-based joint task forces to perform their missions.

It is too early to draw up a comprehensive list of lessons learned from the compulsory call-out of reservists for Operation Bushfire Assist, but the call-out appears to have proceeded satisfactorily overall, and was warmly welcomed by the supported agencies and affected communities at the time. Several lessons, though, have already emerged and no doubt many more will follow as various post-operation inquiries report their findings.

Perhaps the most important lesson to emerge to date relates to the manner of the announcement of the compulsory call-out by the Commonwealth Government. The announcement caught the New South Wales Government – and especially its Rural Fire Commissioner, the official responsible for fighting the fires – by surprise, and it did so

on the most difficult day of the emergency. Notwithstanding that the ADF had been working with state officials for more than a month, the states had not been consulted on, nor warned in advance of, the compulsory call-out or of how the troops would be employed. This was particularly unhelpful when the states held the relevant constitutional powers, not the Commonwealth – some initially saw it as an attempted Commonwealth Government takeover. It is a measure of the leaders involved on both sides that the issue was quickly rectified and no lasting damage was done. Such a mis-communication and co-ordination lapse, however, must not be repeated in any future emergency.

This high-level lapse notwithstanding, the impression gained by people I have spoken to who had firsthand experience of the delivery of Operation Bushfire Assist on the ground in New South Wales, was that Defence delivered in excess of community expectations.

**David Leece<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup>Dr David Leece is editor of *United Service*. These are his personal views.