

The Australian Defence Force's response to the bushfire and COVID-19 crises of 2020

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The Australian Army's 2nd Division, composed mostly of reservists – part-time citizen soldiers – has the assigned responsibility for leading domestic operations and did so during the 2020 bushfire and COVID-19 pandemic crises. Herein, the Division's commander describes the Australian Defence Force's joint response to the two crises, the command and control arrangements, interactions with civilian agencies and the wider community. She then describes how the Division, concurrently, continued to fulfil its ongoing responsibilities for other operations and readiness training.

Key words: Australian Defence Force; Australian Army Reserve; 2nd Division; bushfires; COVID-19 pandemic; 2020.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you during what is a busy, challenging and unprecedented time for the 2nd Division and, indeed, for our whole nation. The Australian Government has asked a lot of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), in particular of the Army Reserve, over the last 13 months. The men and women of the 2nd Division have proved to be an important capability for the ADF and the nation. They have brought their diverse blend of military and civilian experience, skills and insights to help the government respond to two of the most significant domestic crises we have faced. Through the bushfires of last summer and the COVID-19 pandemic², Reservists serving across the country have strengthened our connection to community and country.

In this paper, I will discuss the vital role the 2nd Division plays in the integrated defence force. This is reflected in how our people have responded to the challenges of 2020 and how we continue to meet the demands of our strategic environment through our continued transformation. This transformation demands that the Division can navigate significant changes in the way it operates, while we support enduring domestic and international operations, continue daily business and provide world-class training that ensures we can deliver capability across the spectrum of operations from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to war fighting and security tasks.

2nd Division's Role – Domestic Operations Lead

Firstly, let us look at how the 2nd Division's role and focus have evolved in the recent past. Transformation is not new to us. From providing a base for mobilisation, to augmenting the Regular Army and through the

Ready Reserve Scheme, we have adjusted our structure and focus as strategic circumstances have demanded.

Under Plan Beersheba, the 2nd Division's main effort shifted to providing additional combat capability to the Army's combat brigades. The Division's annual focus for the past several years has been raising, training and sustaining a reinforcing battle group³ to support the ready brigade⁴ at a time when operations in Iraq and Afghanistan stretched Army's capability. The 2nd Division's reinforcing role made sound strategic sense. It also grounded the Division in foundation war fighting, the core role of any military force and one we retain.

In recent years, the Australian Government has called on the Army and wider ADF to prepare for an increasing range of operational contingencies given growing strategic competition and uncertainty. Our high-readiness, full-time forces must be focused on responding to short-notice contingencies overseas, yet the government still expects the ADF to support the Australian community during natural disasters and other civilian emergencies. With this expectation forecast to grow even more, on 1 September 2019, the Chief of Army formally assigned responsibility for leading domestic operations to the 2nd Division. Our geographic spread and deep community links means this is a mission to which we are uniquely suited. In what has been a year like no other, our lead role in responding to the summer bushfires and the COVID pandemic has shown that this is a mission we can perform easily.

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²Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It apparently emerged in China in 2019 and reached pandemic proportions globally during 2020.

³A battle group is a unit-sized force, based usually on an infantry battalion, which is augmented by attached supporting arms and services which are under the unit's command. The actual grouping usually is task-specific.

⁴The Australian Army maintains one of its three combat brigade groups ready for combat operations all the time. The ready brigade group is on-call for one calendar year before the duty rotates to its nominated successor.

Bushfires

Call-out of Reservists

On 4 January 2020, on advice of the federal government, the Governor-General issued a call out of defence reservists under sub-sub-section 50D (2) (g) of the *Defence Act, 1903* (Cwlth) for continuous full-time service to provide civil aid, humanitarian assistance, medical or civil emergency, or disaster relief, from the date of that order until revoked.

This was the first time in the history of the Commonwealth of Australia that this power had been invoked – the first time reserve brigades had been called out to support a large-scale disaster. It also would be the largest mobilisation of the ADF for domestic disaster relief that Australia had seen. 2nd Division personnel formed an integral part of the ADF commitment, with nearly 2700 reserve personnel responding to the call out by rendering continuous full-time service, with another 940 members serving on part-time training days. The Reserve provided the core of the Defence response. We were joined by 2800 full-time Army and around 1300 Navy and Air Force personnel and 50 representatives from the Commonwealth Public Service. The 2nd Division had provided support to disaster relief in the past, but this was on an altogether different scale.

Command and Control

The response to the bushfires would also drive transformation in the command and control of domestic operations. Headquarters 2nd Division at Randwick was established as the national mounting headquarters with the 4th, 5th and 9th Brigades stood up as joint task forces to support state and territory governments. Our role as a mounting headquarters ensured that part-time forces integrated quickly with our full-time (permanent ADF) counterparts, other emergency and public services and, eventually, with foreign militaries. As the operation progressed, we would be joined by contingents from New Zealand, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Indonesia.

Joint Task Force 1111

The 9th Brigade-led Joint Task Force 1111 in South Australia is an exemplar of total force integration on operations. It comprised the 9th Brigade headquarters, units from across the state and from Tasmania, as well as the 6th Brigade's 16th Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery. Other crucial support came from the 1st and 17th Brigades and troops from New Zealand. At its peak, the task force in South Australia had almost 1400 soldiers deployed. Only a properly trained military force could have responded as quickly as we did and integrate disparate units into a combined force operating in particularly adverse and dangerous conditions in what our Chief of Army describes as an Army for the nation and an Army in the community.

Link to Local Communities

Our reservists provided a crucial link to local authorities and communities in times of need. Private Brody Scott, a specialist driver, is but one example. She was flown in with other combat service support members from her unit to assist the remaining residents of her hometown of Mallacoota in Victoria's East Gippsland, cut off for weeks by a ring of fire. After a brief reunion with her parents whose home had fortunately been spared, she spent the following weeks undertaking fuel deliveries in Mallacoota in support of the Country Fire Authority and the State Emergency Service. Private Scott said at the time that Mallacoota, even for such a small town, had provided her with every opportunity. Private Scott joined an Army for the nation but she also joined an Army in the community.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Just as the demands of Operation Bushfire Assist eased, governments across Australia were taking steps to respond to the growing COVID-19 pandemic. On 27 March 2020, Joint Task Force 629 (JTF 629), based on the 2nd Division, was formed to command the ADF's contribution to the whole-of-government response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the states and territories. The 2nd Division's capacity to respond to domestic crises and to command a joint force would consolidate during this operation. Headquarters JTF 629 was, and still is, based on an augmented Headquarters 2nd Division. A significant facilities upgrade, based on the establishment of a 24-hour joint operations room, with modern communication systems and a common operating procedure, has been central to our ability to effectively command and co-ordinate a complex and often highly-sensitive operation.

The JTF was supported by joint task groups (JTGs) in each state and territory which co-ordinated with civilian agencies to deliver the ADF support on the ground. These JTGs were based on our brigade headquarters with additional task groups stood up in both Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

Supporting Civilian Agencies

Coming off the back of the bushfires, many of our commanders and headquarters staff were already experienced at working in support of civilian agencies, highlighting yet again the value of our communal links. As is identified in the 2020 defence strategic update⁵, the ADF is required to enhance its support of civilian authorities – doing so is reliant on strengthening partnerships with the authorities in the states and territories.

⁵Defence (2020). *Defence strategic update* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

Our support to the COVID response has seen these partnerships mature and deepen on-the-ground over the last seven months. 2nd Division members have supported civilian police manage state and territory borders – in sub-zero temperatures in southern New South Wales; to remote outback areas of South Australia and the Northern Territory. They assisted with planning and logistics, have welcomed Australians home from around the globe, and supported quarantine management and contact tracing.

The very size of the response to Operation COVID-19 has required a significant commitment from the whole of the ADF. Reserve personnel accounted for over 50 per cent of the JTF from March until a surge of personnel into Victoria and New South Wales at the end of June. Over the next 10 weeks, we saw Reserve personnel more than double within the JTF to over 600 by mid-September. As of late October, over 3000 2nd Division members have deployed on Operation COVID-19 Assist on top of the deployment of over 3000 reservists during the bushfires. This is a remarkable achievement, with a majority serving on both operations.

Link to Local Communities

Private Frank Marra from the Northern Territory community of Niu is one of them. Having only enlisted in Norforce⁶ in September 2019, Private Marra deployed to Kangaroo Island, South Australia, to remove burnt trees and clear footpaths in the national park during the January bushfires. He since has deployed on Operation COVID-19 Assist twice, including: three weeks at a police checkpoint about half-an-hour from his home community; and, later, four weeks on a checkpoint near the West Australian border.

Economic Significance of Reserve Service:

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the most significant economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s and, in some cases, reserve service has provided employment for members who would have otherwise been unemployed or under-employed. As a result of redundancies, layoffs and stand downs, the 2nd Division's ongoing commitment to Operation COVID-19 Assist will continue for as long as the government requires it. We also are ready to respond to large-scale domestic and regional events ahead of the high-risk weather season concurrent with the commitment to Operation COVID-19 Assist.

Other Operations and Training

Border and Fisheries Protection: The 2nd Division also has not lost momentum in support of other critical operations. We have continued to deploy contingents on Operation Resolute to protect Australia's borders and maritime interests. The 51st Battalion, The Far North Queensland Regiment,⁷ has commanded Operation Overarch, with a continuous deployment since February monitoring the transit of people through the Torres Strait. Further, some 5 per cent of 2nd Division members have deployed on overseas operations so far this year.

War Fighting

While disaster relief operations have captured our focus this year, we continue to prepare for war fighting. The Division will continue to raise, train and sustain a reinforcing battle group to pair with the full-time ready brigade in 2021. Battlegroup Cannon, based on the 11th and 13th Brigades, will partner with the 3rd Brigade during Exercise Talisman Sabre, the major combined exercise with the United States in 2021.

Domestic Security

In recent months brigade-based assurance exercises have been conducted to practise the skills and procedures needed to support domestic security operations, another complex and demanding mission for which we are responsible.

Family, Employer and Community Support

As ever, the ability of the 2nd Division to serve on operations has been underpinned by support for our soldiers from their families, employers, educational institutions and local communities. As but one example, only with continued support from his employer, the Australian Submarine Corporation (ASC), could Sapper Ethan Cotton of the 10th/27th Battalion, The Royal South Australian Regiment, have deployed on Operation COVID-19 Assist following his involvement in Operation Bushfire Assist. Sapper Cotton joined ASC under the postgraduate programme as an engineer and has never looked back. He is pleased to say that the company encourages its reservists to stay actively engaged and professionally trained. Whether it be small businesses in regional communities, large private employers, or government departments, without that support we could not generate the capability that we do.

⁶North-West Mobile Force, an Army Reserve regional force surveillance unit headquartered in Darwin and dispersed throughout the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It focuses primarily on coastal surveillance.

⁷Another Army Reserve regional force surveillance unit focused on coastal surveillance, this one based in far-north Queensland (Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria) with its headquarters in Cairns.

⁸8th Brigade (Training) provides individual (as opposed to collective or unit training) for reservists across Australia – a role analogous in many ways to that of the former state-based training groups.

Training Innovation

COVID-19 has challenged us to think of different ways to deliver training outcomes. The 8th Brigade's⁸ innovative approaches have ensured our initial employment training has continued in addition to courses at Kapooka. We ran the part-time recruit course with the Training Block 1 of the officer training course for the first time in Queensland in order to negate the need for interstate travel and quarantining. Running course modules back-to-back and in home locations where possible has also reduced travel requirements and effectively fast-tracked training while working within government restrictions. We have still managed to achieve about 90 per cent of our directed training requirement.

Indigenous Training

We have continued to be an exemplar of training transformation and the wider Army continues to look closely at our flexible models of training delivery. We also have been able to continue the Army Indigenous development programme in the Northern Territory. This is a pathway for Indigenous Australians who wish to join the Army, but who do not meet the general entry standards. Run by the Regional Force Surveillance Group, this training forms a major part of Defence's commitment to the Australian Government's whole-of-government strategy of "closing the gap"⁹.

The Short-term Outlook

In the short-term, the 2nd Division will continue its transition to a military force able to conduct foundation war fighting, while re-posturing to support the Australian community during natural disasters and other emergencies as the ADF's domestic force of choice. It will progressively reorganise to focus on key outputs, like liaison with emergency services and generating the capabilities needed for the high-risk weather season and domestic security incidents – each task having its own intricacies, risks and challenges.

The 2nd Division will also retain the responsibility for the reinforcing battle group and support to specified operations. This is a positive change for the Division which will see exciting developments in a number of areas. In Western Australia, we have been growing our cavalry scout capability as well as our engineers. The recent appointment of a special forces officer at Headquarters 13th Brigade also will provide new perspectives and opportunities to increase co-operation with full-time units in Western Australia. We also have

committed to the ongoing development of Army's total workforce system.

Conclusion

2020 has reinforced the value of a diverse workforce when solving complex problems. The integration of full-time and part-time members at all levels, including in operational command positions, has enabled Army to support the community in overcoming unprecedented challenges. Our integrated workforce leverages part-time skill sets, frees up capacity in critical areas and enables knowledge transfer across the organisation. The end result is a more capable Army.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you just some of what the Australian Army Reserve and the 2nd Division in particular has been doing in this most challenging of years. The future of the 2nd Division is increasingly operationally focused and integrated as part of the joint force. Integrated not only with the Regular Army as we continue to generate warfighting capabilities for overseas operations, but through the establishment of a JTF for commanding both full-time and part-time joint forces on domestic operations, we also will be working ever more closely with emergency services in the states and territories. As a result of our successes in 2020, we have proven this capability and won the trust of government and the community. We can expect an increasingly demanding but rewarding future.

The Author: Major General Kathryn Jane Campbell, AO, CSC, a citizen soldier, is commander of the Australian Army's 2nd Division, which contains most of the Army's reservists. She is the first woman to be appointed to the role. In civilian life, with a background in public policy and programme management, she is a career public administrator who has led two Commonwealth Government departments. She is currently Secretary of the Department of Social Services (2017 to date) and previously was Secretary of the Department of Human Services (2011-2017). She was commissioned into the Royal Australian Signals Corps in 1990 and her subsequent military career has included command of the Sydney University Regiment (2007-2009), the 5th Brigade (2014-2016), deputy command of Joint Task Force 633 in the Middle East in 2016, and now command of the 2nd Division (December 2018 to date), including during the 2020 bushfire and COVID crises. For her command of the Sydney University Regiment, she was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross in 2010. She was appointed an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia in 2019 for distinguished service to public administration through senior roles with government departments, and to the Australian Army Reserve. [Photo of General Campbell: Department of Defence]

⁸8th Brigade (Training) provides individual (as opposed to collective or unit training) for reservists across Australia – a role analogous in many ways to that of the former state-based training groups.

⁹The Australian Government's "closing the gap" initiative is its attempts to close the gap in average health, education and other social outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.