

Island Australia: improving resilience in a rapidly-changing region

The contribution of the Australian Defence Force to civil resilience



A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 23 November 2021 by

Major General David Thomae, AM

Commander 2nd Division

Vice-Patron, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales

The Australian Defence Force contributes to civil resilience by providing assistance to the civil community when requested to do so by state and territory governments when those governments are responding to natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, storms, cyclones and pandemics. Headquarters Joint Task Force 629, with task groups in each state and territory, has been raised to command and control assistance provided to the civil community.

Key words: Australia; Australian Defence Force; bushfires; civil resilience; cyclones; domestic operations; floods; natural disasters; pandemics.

Australians have endured frequent, intense natural disasters over the past 12 years which have tested our national resilience. Civil resilience is shaped by how we as a nation respond to such adversity. Earlier in this seminar, Major General Matt Pearse discussed how the Australian Army contributes to national resilience (Pearse 2022). In this paper, I will focus on the contribution of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to enhancing civil resilience during domestic operations.

Defence Force Assistance to the Civil Community During Natural Disasters

In Australia over recent years, across multiple state jurisdictions, state governments have approached the Commonwealth Government with increasing regularity for assistance to augment their emergency response to significant natural disasters – to provide what is known as Defence Force assistance to the civil community (DFACC). These disasters have included the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009; Cyclone Yasi in north Queensland in 2011; the southeast Queensland floods also in 2011; the Wagga Wagga floods in 2012; and the Blue Mountains bushfires in 2013. In particular, in the last two years, there has been much to test Australia's civil resilience from a range of natural disasters to the ongoing challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since late 2019, there has been a continuous ADF operational campaign providing assistance to the civil community in response to national emergencies. From August 2019 to March 2020, the ADF supported state

governments and their emergency services during Operation Bushfire Assist. On 4 January 2020, in response to extreme bushfire events, the Governor-General, on advice from the Minister of Defence, authorised a compulsory call-out of ADF reserves. The reserves were to provide emergency functions to support and enable firefighters and emergency services and the call-out was limited initially to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. This was the first time that the Governor-General's power to call out Defence Force reserves had been activated. It was in response to the catastrophic fire that engulfed over 24 million hectares across the country, destroying lives and property. The call-out ensured high levels of support culminating in 1500 tasks completed across New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. More than 8000 ADF members were deployed on Operation Bushfire Assist.

As the Royal Commission conducted in the aftermath of the bushfires reported on 28 October 2020 (Binskin *et al.* 2020), the primary role of the ADF is defending and protecting Australia. Although not its primary role, the ADF also provides assistance through its capabilities and resources during and after natural disasters. In some cases assistance is significant, such as during and in the aftermath of the 2019-20 bushfires. It is important to note that the warfighting skills of the ADF form a critical component of capability in the ADF's ability to respond to short-notice domestic contingencies. Further, the widespread geographic footprint of the ADF and its close links to community and partner agencies, allows the ADF to respond effectively and quickly when called upon by government to support states in meeting these emergency challenges.

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Operation Bushfire Assist

During Operation Bushfire Assist, Army Private Jonathan Amy, an Akuma local, returned to support his home community as a heavy vehicle operator hauling a water purification and desalination system. He said at the time: "It's actually thrilling being able to assist my community and the district". This is a very common reaction from ADF members supporting their communities.

The call-out of ADF reserves was not the only unprecedented aspect of Operation Bushfire Assist. The headquarters of three formations of the Army's 2nd Division were tasked to lead joint task groups across three jurisdictions. Simultaneously, a step-change to the new Zenith Start Headquarters within communities where the ADF support is required. Reservists drawing upon their connection to community and civilian skills contributed a civil-military mindset that enhanced the ADF's overall response.

The current commander of the Australia-wide Joint Task Force 629 (JTF 629), who had commanded the JTF 629 joint task group in New South Wales during Operation Bushfire Assist, Brigadier Mick Garraway, has said that working with a partnered force and partnered organisations dealing with damage commensurate with that of a battlefield, not only provides excellent preparation for conventional operations, but the ADF's Reserve brought to the ADF's response enhanced awareness of the human terrain.

On Anzac Day 2021, the small New South Wales coastal town of Eden invited members of the 5th Engineer Regiment and HMAS *Supply* back to Eden to thank them for their service to the town and region during the bushfires. Eden RSL² Sub-Branch secretary, Tony Larkin, said it was a privilege to welcome the 5th Engineer Regiment and the Navy back to Eden, not to see the devastation they helped to fight against, but to see how we Aussies fight back – to see the 'green' after the 'black'.

Floods, Cyclones, Storms and Pandemics

As mentioned earlier, the ADF has a long and proud heritage of assisting communities in response to natural disasters. Even as recently as 2019, more than 1000 ADF personnel, largely drawn from the 3rd Combat Brigade in Townsville, assisted recovery operations after floods in north Queensland. In March and April 2021, the ADF provided support to communities during floods in New South Wales and, subsequently, supported communities after Tropical Cyclone Seroja in Western Australia. Throughout June and July 2021, the ADF supported storm recovery in

Victoria's Dandenong ranges. As the Chief of Army emphasises, it just demonstrates how much we are an army for the nation and an army in the community.

Most strikingly, since March 2020, the ADF has played a pivotal role in contributing to a whole-of-government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with scalable support to state and territory authorities as part of Operation COVID-19 Assist. During this operation, the ADF has supported a wide range of tasks including:

- mandatory state and territory hotel quarantine;
- support to health and law enforcement authorities, ensuring home quarantine compliance;
- providing welfare support;
- providing frontline COVID-19 swab testing and support to mass vaccination hubs;
- undertaking contact tracing;
- providing planning and logistical support;
- supporting state and territory police at vehicle checkpoints; and
- vaccination of residents in aged and disability care facilities in central and western New South Wales where Defence vaccination teams have provided more than 50,000 vaccinations to remote rural and indigenous communities.

Charities and Non-Government Organisations

Another task for the ADF has been supporting numerous charities and non-government organisations, such as Food Bank and Oz Harvest, with the preparation and distribution of food and care packages destined for the most vulnerable in the community.

The president of the Sikh charity Turbans4Australia, Mr Ammar Singh, said that, without the ADF support, he and his fellow volunteers would not have been able to manage the delivery of 1500 care parcels each week. As noted by Air Force Flying Officer Ryan Elliot, the ADF is supporting Turbans4Australia to help the community in its time of need. The Australian community expects that the ADF will support government and emergency agencies to respond to natural disasters at home when requested.

Interoperability with Emergency Services

For the ADF to respond effectively to support state agencies in their responses to natural disasters and contribute to Australia's civil resilience, we must focus on interoperability with the emergency services in both training and on operations at the state and local level, as outlined by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (ADIR 2019). The interconnectedness of systems in society causes cascading consequences in emergencies. Effectively managing risks, therefore, requires all sectors of society to have planned for emergencies. At a national level, the Australian government plans to support emergencies that are severe and catastrophic in nature and are likely to overwhelm the capacity of state and territory

²Returned and Services League of Australia

authorities. Likewise, state and territory governments plan and prepare for natural disasters in their jurisdictions, cascading down to regional and local government as part of the emergency management framework. As identified in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (Defence 2020), the ADF is required to enhance its support of civilian authorities. This is achieved by strengthening partnerships with authorities in the states and territories.

A key lesson from the Royal Commission (Binskin *et al.* 2020) was that it is essential for the ADF to persistently maintain relationships with the state and territory emergency management framework rather than respond afresh to each new crisis. The importance of these enduring relationships was voiced by New South Wales Police Deputy Commissioner Mike Williams when he said that the way emergency services worked with the ADF during the 2019-20 bushfire crisis is a great example of the benefits of a joint-agency approach. Due to these relationships, the respect and understanding we have for each other is fostered. This approach, in my view, has helped to save the state of New South Wales this time.

To further develop these partnerships in the lead up to the 2021-22 high-risk weather season, fire headquarters partnered with the Australian Civil-Military Centre to host a symposium to share lessons learned from previous and current domestic operations. Joined by Emergency Management Australia and partner agencies, the focus was on collaboration and on building and maintaining enduring relationships.

2nd Division and Joint Task Force 629

The Army's 2nd Division is uniquely placed within the ADF and Australian Army to provide the command and control architecture and local force-elements needed to meet short-notice domestic operational requirements across Australia. To do so, it uses its formation headquarters in each of the mainland states, with additional nodes in Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. The Division maintains long-standing and enduring communal links and has a proven capacity to respond to domestic crises at short notice, leveraging on Army Reserve units based in the community.

Of particular importance to the ADF's capacity to respond to domestic crises, was the establishment of Joint Task Force 629 in March 2020. This national joint task force was initially raised by the Chief of the Defence Force to command force-elements for Operation COVID-19 Assist, largely drawing upon the 2nd Division, but also including large contributions from all three services.

As the ADF's contribution to Operation COVID-19 Assist draws to a close, JTF 629 has been retained. It will continue to provide command and control, along with its state- and territory-based joint task-group

headquarters, when supporting domestic operations during the high-risk weather season.

Conclusion

The ADF has contributed significantly to enhancing the nation's resilience for a long time. It has become more prominent in the past two years with the scale and scope of ADF support of civilian responses to concurrent bushfires, floods, cyclones, storms and the pandemic. As an enduring trend, the ADF continues to maintain its readiness and preparedness to provide the support to government and the community in their time of need.

In Taree, New South Wales, in March 2021, residents waved Australian flags when a convoy of ADF vehicles entered their flood-ravaged town. One of them, 70-year-old Darty Osborne, said: "It fills me with pride to see the road filled with camouflage uniforms and lots of vehicles and support. It is like the cavalry coming to have the strength of the ADF to complement the efforts of our emergency services, fire department, police force, ambulance service and SES (State Emergency Service)."

The Author:

Major General David Thomae assumed command of the 2nd Division on 17 July 2021. He graduated from the Royal Military College Duntroon to the Royal Australian Infantry Corps in 1988. He saw regimental service with 2/4th and 6th Battalions, The Royal Australian Regiment; 16th Battalion, The Royal Western Australia Regiment; and 25th and 9th Battalions, The Royal Queensland Regiment, the last of which he commanded in 2007-08. He has seen operational service in Lebanon, Syria, East Timor, and Iraq. Senior leadership roles have included Commander 11 Brigade, Adjutant General – Army, and Commander Joint Task Group 629.3, the ADF task group responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Queensland. In civil life, he is a commercial barrister at the Queensland Bar. In 2021, he was appointed a Member in the Military Division of the Order of Australia. [Photo of General Thomae: Department of Defence].

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