

Marching on

What's next for the Army?



In the aftermath of the Australian led INTERFET operation most Australians are proud of the contribution made by the Australian Army. But what future challenges face our Army and will it be ready for them? That is what Parliament's Defence Committee is attempting to find out.

Parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee has, throughout the years, investigated many and varied aspects of Australia's defence. Surprisingly, the Defence Committee has never conducted an inquiry into one of Australia's Defence Services. In July 1999, the Defence Committee decided to change tack. It was determined to have a good look at the Defence Service that is, for many Australians, part of our national myth – the Australian Army, home of the 'digger'.

The Australian Army has a proud record that has been enhanced by a string of recent peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, Somalia, Bougainville and East Timor. But no Army can afford to rest on its laurels. As Prime Minister John Howard indicated in

April this year: "Without in any way being alarmist, but just being realistic, the region is potentially less stable."

This instability means that the Army must be prepared for a range of challenges in the future. The Defence Committee decided to find out if our Army will be ready.

For the past 10 months the Defence Committee has been inquiring into the suitability of the Army for peacetime, peacekeeping and war. This broad ranging inquiry has received more than 70 written submissions and held seven public and two private hearings. The evidence received has helped to reveal the concerns Australians have about defence and the country's future security.

Continued on page 20

Continued from page 19

The Defence Committee has found that Australians want the Army to be able to protect Australia and its interests. They want it properly trained and equipped. They also want Australia to play its part in helping the United Nations secure peace both regionally and in other areas of the globe. With so many expectations of the Army (and the Navy and Air Force), the Defence Committee feels it will be a real challenge to meet all the demands with only finite resources. Fortunately, the Defence Committee has been helped in this by many constructive suggestions received from the public.

'A proud record enhanced by recent peacekeeping operations.'

The Defence Committee has received a number of submissions addressing community concerns about the Army Reserve. Others have made constructive suggestions about the Army's equipment

needs, its system of training and amendments to its structure. The Defence Committee is confident that these ideas can be used to help the Army as it moves to address the inevitable uncertainties of this first decade of the 21st century.

The Defence Committee is now in the process of analysing all the information received. It has considered aspects as varied as the shifts that appear to be occurring in government strategic policy, changes in military technology and the Army's relationship to the other Services. The Defence Committee has the difficult task of considering the amount of money Australians are willing to spend on the Army and where they want it spent. All of these issues impact on how 'suitable' the Army will be to fulfill its obligations in peace, peacekeeping and war.

The Defence Committee expects to table its report in Parliament in September. Further information can be obtained from the Defence Committee's web site at: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/army/inqindex.htm or call (02) 6277 2313.



Regional instability means that the Australian Army must be prepared for a range of challenges in the future. Photographs courtesy of the Department of Defence.