

# Tracked arguments and soft ground:

## Reflections on public argument about the Abrams tank decision

Paul Monk

***The purchase of these behemoths...has polarised the Australian military and its analysts like no other acquisition. What do we want them for? Where is Australia planning to fight next? Are they a waste of money? How are we going to get them overseas?***

**Paul Daley, *The Bulletin*, 03 October 2006**

On 17 July 2007, the Commonwealth Auditor General, Ian McPhee, presented Audit Report No. 1 of 2007-08, *Acquisition of the Abrams Main Battle Tank* to Parliament. The report, by ANAO Executive Director Colin Cronin and his colleagues Darren Coonan and Andrew Craig, reached the finding that the acquisition had been handled with a high degree of cost effectiveness and that the choice of the Abrams over other candidate vehicles to replace the ageing Leopard AS1s was sound on both technical and financial grounds. This provides a rather good context in which to tell the story of an analysis of the tank decision that Austthink Consulting undertook over six months in 2007.

### Army experimental framework

About five years ago, before the decision to buy the new Abrams tanks for the Army had been announced, my business partner, Tim van Gelder, and I were invited to attend a briefing at the Land Warfare Development Centre at Puckapunyal. It featured research that had been done under the aegis of the Army Experimental Framework (AEF), then headed by Lieutenant Colonel Grant Sanderson. Grant had been saying to us for some time that better thinking was needed for decision making within the Army. He invited us along to witness some of the better thinking that *was* being done in an experimental context.

The research was into how the Army conducted close combat in both open and complex (jungle, urban, etc) terrain. It included simulations and historical analysis of actual operations, most notably in Vietnam. It had led to the judgment that the heavy armoured (tank) capability needed to be maintained and, indeed, upgraded. We came away fascinated by some of the work that had been done, but we had no brief at the time to analyse it. What the briefing provided, however, was sufficient background to the subsequent decision to renew the Army's tank capability that

we were better placed than most non-specialists to understand that decision.

It was with considerable interest, therefore, that we followed the debate over the decision, from the time it was announced in March 2004, through to late 2006. It was especially notable that on 10 July 2006, when launching Paul Dibb's *Essays on Australian Defence*, at the ANU (where he is now Chancellor), former Secretary of the Department of Defence, Allan Hawke, should have declared, that the decision had been 'ridiculous' and had had 'disastrous repercussive effects'. When *The Bulletin* printed a cover story with the subjective caption 'Dud's Army' over a picture of an Abrams, however, we saw an opportunity to contribute to the public debate.

### Mapping arguments

What had got Grant Sanderson interested in having us at Puckapunyal was a new technique we had been developing for laying out complex argument structures, so that they were easier to follow. We called it 'argument mapping'. Grant had done an early version of our Advanced Reasoning and Analysis workshop, in which we used a software program called *Reason!Able* (Tim's brainchild) to construct and evaluate argument maps of a famously complex debate: the contention that there must have been a conspiracy in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. By October 2006, we had a vastly more sophisticated software tool called *Rationale* and we saw in the tank debate an opportunity to apply it. I got on the phone, therefore, to Brigadier Justin Kelly, then Director-General Future Land Warfare, and asked would he support the idea of us argument mapping the debate. He was strongly supportive and the idea was approved by the Deputy Chief of Army within a matter of weeks.

Given the widespread cynicism about consultants writing to more or less explicit instructions, I should make it clear that the proposal in this case was to expose the case for the

new tanks to critical examination, including the enlistment of devil's advocates, in order to establish where the criticisms of the decision were coming from and how much validity they had. The Army might have declined to engage our services, on the perfectly reasonable grounds that the decision had been taken already and did not need critical examination. Instead, however, it welcomed the opportunity to have the case set out clearly; confident that the decision had been sound. Some, including the world-weary director of the Armoured Corps, asked 'Why are we still having this debate?' But all accepted our response: Because the case has not been understood or accepted by the public at large and even by some in the Defence community.

## Mapping the tank argument – grouping and ordering

We faced a set of challenges in trying to reconstruct and analyse the public debate. The first of these, of course, was to get clear what, exactly, had been the case made for buying the new tanks. The second was to ascertain what the full set of objections was. The third was to construct an argument map which would show precisely where the objections impinged on the case. The fourth was to ascertain how valid these objections were. Finally, there would be a need to set out the analysis in such a manner that any reasonable person could see the overall argument, and account explicitly for whether and for what reasons they concurred with or dissented from the decision.

We discovered that there was a mismatch between the case advanced by the Minister and the Army for buying the new tanks and the objections being made by the critics of the decision. There was a great deal of confusion in the public debate, because the two sides were often talking past one another. We discovered, also, that the numerous objections to the decision to buy the tanks did not constitute a coherent or common argument. Rather, they came from all sorts of directions and badly needed to be put in order and thought through more carefully than they seemed to have been. Finally, we discovered that the official case for tanks contained what appeared to be gaps or even errors which called for closer examination, if the case was to be properly evaluated.

The case made publicly, by the Minister (then Senator Robert Hill) and the Chief of Army, for the purchase of the Abrams tanks was that the decision represented clear policy continuity from the 2000 Defence White Paper, that it was aimed at ensuring the Army would have the combat weight necessary for it to achieve its missions without undue risk, and that the tanks were being bought in small numbers so that, at need, we could provide a sustainable squadron of them for deployment where close combat might occur in the context of what are normally referred to as 'low-intensity operations'. The critics often seemed to be asserting, on the other hand, that the tanks were being bought because the Army (or the Coalition Government) wanted to be able to participate in high-intensity, continental-scale warfare

alongside the Americans. This misalignment plainly called for attention.

The assertion that the tanks were only intended for American wars was made, for example, by Hugh White. 'My hunch,' he told the *Bulletin's* Paul Daley, 'is the Army leadership proposed to government that we buy the [Abrams] tank because they wanted to be able to put Australian tanks into American armoured operations... the next time America invaded a country, they wanted Australian tanks flying Australian flags to be driving up the road to Damascus or Tehran, take your pick.' This opinion is plainly not confined to White; but it is a misconception. Had the decision been based on such a plan, it would have made little sense to buy so few tanks – far fewer than we have ever had since World War II. In reality, the decision was demonstrably based on a different desideratum: being able to prevail in lethal fighting on a small scale, should it erupt during stabilisation or counter-insurgency operations. The decision was, as the Chief of Army stipulated in August 2004, much influenced by the Australian experience of the utility of tanks during close combat in Papua New Guinea and Borneo in the 1940s and Vietnam in the 1960s. Recent Canadian experiences in Afghanistan seem to reinforce this line of argument.

The problem with the objections, taken as a whole, is that they were often mutually incompatible. Critics would allege, for instance, both that the tanks had been bought so that they could be sent far away to fight alongside the Americans and, at the same time, that they could not be moved overseas, or even around Australia. They would allege that we should not have bought tanks because they would be seen as threatening by our South East Asian and South West Pacific neighbours, but at the same time that they would be of no use in the soft terrain of South East Asia and the South West Pacific. They would allege that the tanks are an 'over the top' acquisition for an Army that does not need to do serious, conventional fighting, but also that tanks are, in general, now obsolete platforms and therefore not needed for such fighting.

Several attempts were made by David Kilcullen in recent times (see for example the Summer 2006/07 *Defender*) to sort out these various objections. We found his work helpful, but even he did not show how the overall argument fits together. Having sifted through the objections we concluded that there were five fundamental ones which subsumed the others:

- that the Abrams tanks represented an unacceptable opportunity cost;
- that the Abrams tanks will be unusable (because they are supposedly too heavy, impossible to deploy and so on);
- that maintaining the tank capability was an unsound decision, because tanks are an obsolete platform in the 21st century context;
- that regardless of the merits of the Abrams, the tanks were a pointless buy, because we would never use them in our own region, out of deference to the sensitivities of our neighbours; and
- that buying the tanks was an unsound decision, because the 2000 Defence White Paper called for a land force equipped for low-intensity operations in our own region and tanks will not be required for such operations.

The claim that the tanks were bought because the Army wanted to fight alongside the Americans on the road to Damascus is, we think, a consideration that belongs within this last objection – viz., that we should equip our land force only for low-intensity operations within our own region. We call this overall objection ‘the 6:24 problem’, because the relevant passage of the 2000 Defence White Paper is chapter 6, paragraph 24.

## Mapping the tank argument – establishing context

Having thus grouped and ordered the objections, we then placed them in the context of the case actually made for the decision by the Minister and the Chief of Army. To do that, however, we had first to clarify what, precisely, that case had been. The elements of it were in the public domain and were strongly confirmed in interviews. The actual train of reasoning, however, was not immediately clear. We determined that, at the end of the day, the case rested on a single line of argument: that maintaining the tank capability was necessary in order to meet the mandate of the 2000 Defence White Paper (chapter 8, paragraph 12): that the Army should have the combat weight needed to achieve its missions without undue risk. All the fundamental objections, we concluded, impinged at specifiable points on the top levels of the case, once it was seen as consisting primarily of this line of argument.

Laying out this line of argument was taxing, but illuminating work. At a preliminary stage, for example, we discovered a curious oversight in the way the case had been made. It rested, to a considerable extent, on the claim that ‘tanks save lives by a factor of six’; the evidence for which was a study of Australian combat data from the Vietnam War. Actually, the data in the study does not show this at all. It shows that the ratio of friendly to enemy casualties had widened by a factor of (almost) six, but that friendly (Australian) casualties had decreased only marginally. A close reading of Kilcullen’s essay in Volume 3, Number 2 of *The Australian Army Journal* (Summer 2006) showed that, like all others who had cited the study, he had conflated the *ratio* of casualties with the *rate* of Australian casualties.

This did not mean, of course, that tanks do not save Australian lives. It meant only that the particular data set analysed from Vietnam War operations did not show that they did so by a factor of six. The impact tanks can have in saving lives has been well enough demonstrated in many theatres of operation and was shown in Vietnam in particular cases. In the last operation in which Centurion tanks were used in Vietnam, in August 1971, they helped take enemy bunkers in jungle terrain for the loss of 1 killed and 5 wounded Australians. Weeks later, after the Centurions had been withdrawn, similar attacks were repeatedly repulsed and finally aborted after the loss of 7 killed and 40 wounded. The interesting thing here, therefore, is only that the difference between rate and ratio eluded so many people for several years, both in the preparation and the dissemination of the study, which was published in July 2003, by the Land

Warfare Studies Centre as a Working Paper, under the title *From Breitenfeld to Baghdad: Perspectives on Combined Arms Warfare*.

As it turned out, the central line of argument did not depend on this much cited (and errant) datum to any significant extent. It rested, rather, on the finding, in Army simulations and studies of recent military operations around the world, that, right across the spectrum of operations to which our land force may be committed in future, there is an increasing danger that benign situations can morph unpredictably into open conflict; that open conflict, particularly in complex terrain (terrain where hostile forces can readily elude detection and dig in to fight) will impose the need to prevail in close combat; and that there is still no substitute for well-protected, highly-mobile, direct-fire support (tanks) if you want to prevail in close combat. The argument holds that it is for this reason that the Army should have at least a modest tank capability; since, otherwise, there is a high risk of hostile elements inflicting significant casualties and even mission failure on Australian forces.

## Mapping the tank argument – sorting the objections

Once the argument was mapped out along these lines, we made several discoveries. Of the five fundamental objections, the only one that had any real force was what we have called the 6:24 problem. The others foundered on



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the sharp end



critical examination, because the tanks did not constitute an opportunity cost, but were a sound investment compared with what else might have been bought with the money; because the tanks can be transported (they have after all been moved to Darwin and many other places), can be deployed (just as we deployed Centurions to Vietnam a generation ago), can be used in soft terrain (since ground pressure, not weight is the key consideration here and the ground pressure of an Abrams is only a quarter that of the wheeled light armoured vehicles we have been using in places like East Timor); because tanks are not obsolete at all, but vital components of combined-arms teams in close combat in low-intensity operations; and because, while we would not lightly deploy tanks in our own region, we would at need, as we have in the past and we should at least have the option, in order to deter potential enemies from contemplating assaults on our (often otherwise outnumbered) land forces.

The 6:24 problem is a little more intractable, because it is, in part, an ideological claim, not a technical one. Should strategic policy be based on the judgment that we should, indeed, only equip our land forces for operations in our (elastically defined) own region; and should it be the case that such operations would not, realistically, require tanks, then the whole argument for maintaining the tank capability would dissolve. It is, surely, in significant measure at least, for this reason that the likes of Allan Hawke and Michael Costello have dismissed the decision as 'ridiculous' and 'ludicrous', respectively. Yet both of these premises must be true for the argument to be undermined and it is not clear that either of them is, at least not in the judgment of the National Security Committee of Cabinet, as made plain in *Strategic Update 2007*. Our own conclusion was that this objection is where further thinking most needs to be directed: to ponder under what circumstances we might actually require and would actually use tanks in our own region.

## Provisional conclusions

Our report was not conceived as a lobbying effort on behalf of the decision. Nor should it be seen as having

'proved' that buying the tanks was a sound decision, though this is its provisional conclusion. Rather, by argument mapping the debate, we hope to have made it much more comprehensible than it has been up to now. What the report does is enable anyone now to see:

- what the core claims in the case are,
- where they sit in relation to one another,
- what the basic objections to the case are,
- where they impinge on the case,
- what their weaknesses are,
- how the claims for and against the decision balance up,
- which considerations are the most important, and
- where the greatest sensitivities in the case are.

This makes it possible to turn down the heat, to comprehend why there have been such passionate and apparently intractable disagreements; and to see where new evidence or a re-evaluation of crucial evidence would make a difference to a reasoned assessment of the matter.

We think this would be a useful set of things to be able to do with public policy decisions more generally; which is why we proposed the tanks case to the Army as a proof-of-concept study. The report we have prepared will have served its purpose just to the extent that it eases the bewilderment and frustration of those engaged on either side of the debate and facilitates a deeper grasp of where they can most fruitfully focus their energies in resolving their differences of opinion. Unsurprisingly, the biggest difference of opinion turns out to be that which divides the proponents of the old Defence-of-Australia doctrine from those who believe we need a joint force capable of amphibious manouvre and close combat across the spectrum of operations, both within the island littoral and more widely. What the report has shown is that debate, if it is to be rational and fruitful, needs to focus on the putative utility of tanks in our own region, since this is the point of greatest sensitivity in the whole case. ♦

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## Conference Calendar

**ADA members and other Defender readers may be interested in the following public conferences and activities:**

- **Military Health Conference 2008**  
*Future Military Medicine: The Role of Defence Health Services in Future War*  
03 May 2008  
Victoria Barracks, Melbourne  
Enquiries: (03) 9827-0960 or [admin@platformpersonnel.com](mailto:admin@platformpersonnel.com)
- **Security Professionals Congress 2008**  
*Shaping the future of the security profession*  
26-27 May 2008  
RACV Club, Melbourne  
Enquiries: (02) 6161-5143 or [events@homelandsecurity.org.au](mailto:events@homelandsecurity.org.au)