

by Nicholas Stuart

There's a pause for a second, and Major General Jim Molan considers his response carefully before replying. "Our commandos are just as good as the British, American and Dutch soldiers they were serving alongside in the Middle East." At first the words sound reassuring, but in fact they shouldn't be. The significance of this statement is not what the general says, but rather what he's leaving out.

No one doubts, for example, the quality of our SAS regiment although it's a small force, it's one of the best Special Forces in the world. Theoretically, the supposedly elite commando battalion ranks next. Our commandos get training and equipment that the other battalions can only dream about. And yet here is one of our most senior and only recently retired generals comparing them with average soldiers in other armies. The implication is that the rest of the army is just not up to scratch and would have serious difficulties if it ever had to engage in a serious battle. And, sure enough, probe further and you find out that's exactly what the general means. It's got nothing to do with courage our diggers are quite OK there. It's got a bit to do with training particularly at the operational level (Colonel and above), where Molan believes there are serious deficiencies. And it's got a lot to do with equipment the soldiers just don't have the firepower they need to prevail.

To understand what Molan is on about you need to first understand where he's coming from. Tall and blue-eyed, he's the general from central casting, but Molan wasn't always destined for the oak leaves of high command. Joining up too late for Vietnam, he later applied to fly helicopters, a skill that branded him as something of a dilettante in an infantry-focused army concentrating on defending Australia instead of "vertical envelopment".

Molan then learned Indonesian and, on his second posting as a brigadier, was our senior attache{aac} in Jakarta during the worst of the crisis in East Timor. After that experience he came back to run the defence college at Weston Creek.

All this background suggests that Molan has a deep understanding that it's not just an ability to fight hard that is vital for success in war; other skills are required as well. But then he was posted to Iraq. The short notice he was given before his departure, a mangled mission statement, and the fact that he was not replaced after a year's sterling service in Baghdad, all smack of a political fix. It was good for the Howard government to be seen to be contributing, at a senior level, to the Iraq reconstruction mission, but it was also helpful not to have too many bodies on the ground ... otherwise some might have stepped in the way of flying bullets. However, Molan is a soldier, and he didn't worry about any of this. Instead, he began by satisfying himself that the occupation was legal (it's sanctioned by the UN), and then he flew to Iraq and reported for duty.

Unsurprisingly, the Americans were nonplussed to find they suddenly had an Australian who'd

arrived at Camp Victory, and who was expecting to actually do something. Molan won't say it, but it seems obvious he was given pretend jobs as people hoped he'd just go away. But the Aussie created his own job, focusing on rebuilding the electricity, fuel and transport infrastructure of the country. Realistically, this was probably the only task the Americans were prepared to give him at first.

Reading Molan's book, *Running the War in Iraq*, it's hard not to feel that it was simply by sheer force of his own personality that he did eventually occupy the job he was originally sent to Iraq for Chief of Operations. In mid-2004, Molan became responsible for tasking 160,000 US soldiers in the war-torn country. According to the Australian National University's Professor David Horner, Molan is now probably the most senior Australian to have served with operational command in battle since World War II. Even in Korea and Vietnam we had no two-star generals intimately involved with the overall fighting.

Molan's biggest battle was probably the re-taking of Fallujah from the insurgency. At first hand he watched the assault go in and saw the house-to-house struggle as six US battalions used brute force to secure positions from which to move forward. Molan remains horrified by the intensity and the savagery of this conflict.

Although some of their leadership slipped away, other insurgents decided to hold on, probably hoping that the Americans' will to regain the city would collapse. It didn't and the city was captured. This allowed the first Iraqi elections to be held at a moment when failure had appeared a real possibility. After seeing the war at first hand, the general is now questioning whether or not our troops are actually capable of effective engaging in the sort of intense, vicious, close-quarter battle that is occurring daily in Iraq. The battalions aren't equipped with the grenade-launchers and heavy calibre machine guns to fight like this. But his critique doesn't stop there.

Molan would like to see the syllabus of the Australian Defence College (which teaches our future generals) urgently revised to focus on actual war fighting. The general insists that "we shouldn't just be focusing on the creation of military bureaucrats. At least a third of our time needs to be devoted to preparing for conflict. At the operational level in particular we're not doing anything sophisticated."

"We are falling behind", says Molan. "We may very well be the best in the world, but I'd like to see some proof. There is a casual assumption that we can do whatever is required ... but what if we can't?"

It's important to note here that Molan is not calling for more money. "We're spending \$22 billion on defence, but for all the money going in, and after 40 years of defence white papers, there is not a lot to show for it." The military has been able to accomplish all the tasks we've thrown at it so far. Molan is worried that in the future it might not be able to.

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