



GETTING IT WRONG

Doctor Allan Orr examines where New South Wales' Tactical Operation Unit came unstuck in the Lindt Café siege in Sydney

The Lindt Café Coronial Enquiry's submittal from Scotland Yard, internally referenced as the *UK Expert Report*, made recommendations almost entirely around equipment shortfalls and not the tactical decision matrix of the New South Wales Police Tactical Operations Unit (TOU). Laser aimers, hearing protection, glass cutting equipment, off-the-shelf items that could have had a profound impact on effectiveness

during the final assault. Tactically, to contain and negotiate was absolutely the right tactic, particularly in an assumed Personal Born Improvised Explosive Device environment. Even the attached outside 'tactical analysts' (presumably military) warned heavily that a pre-planned 'Direct-Action' would risk the lives of several hostages immediately and outside the bomb threat. The strategy paid off to wit, the single hostage taker unable to

It is generally agreed that the soldiers were woefully under equipped

control the space and subsequently two thirds of the hostages were able to independently escape before the final assault.

The resource-restricted sniping option, meanwhile, was precluded by multiple panes of glass, the angle of shot and the fact that either a shotgun or second sniper round would need to be precisely timed with a window of opportunity. Semi-automatic sniper rifles for quick follow-up shots, big bore .50 calibre sniper rifles, explosive entry options, full-auto M4s, laser aimers, hearing and eye protection, glass cutters, suppressors, embarrassingly simple to complex tools, but one and all are outcome influencing capabilities the TOU simply lacked. In stark contrast, on projections Australia has invested almost one billion dollars since 2002 in the least likely to be deployed capability (as well as almost one billion dollars fighting failed overseas wars), a domestic military capability that was supposed to be an interim stop gap and a capability that is as legally thorny and publicly controversial as it is philosophically deleterious to the body-politic.

COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Consequently, here is what 'Operator A' endured the day of the siege. Having been on station at the café for 17 hours with minimal movement and unrelieved (the NSW Police did not have the option to call in off-duty TOU it seems), the team – like all the teams – breached late because of a communication failure, equipment obviously not top shelf given the small distances of broadcast and the number of sets that went down that day among the teams. Breaching conventionally with shotgun rounds breaking the locks and the glass of the first entryway, upon initial entry Operator A was flashbanged by his own team which threw the device late (communication issue?). Blinded by the light burst in his incredibly out-dated NVG set lacking auto light shut off function for sudden, excessive light flash environments, Operator A stopped to take his NVGs off while being blasted by a second '9-banger' which bounced off the second door entry back into the room the assaulters had just entered and just happened to explode towards him, pushing him back into a corner, "Murphy's law" it was said stoically by the TOU commander later.

Without high-attenuation electronic hearing muffs that cancel excessive external noise instantly, Operator A was also deafened and unbalanced by the flashbang, which the UK report stresses exposure in training can only reduce and never fully negate the effects from. Despite this and physical and mental exhaustion from being almost a day without sleep, he was first in the room among his team. In testimony he admitted he was blind when he entered the room where hostage taker Man Haron Monis and the hostages were, because of the flashbangs forcing him to remove his NVGs, that he got eyes on Monis but couldn't acquire him due to the transition from NVG to flash light and that by the time he had reoriented himself Monis was dead.

So 'A' (Delta-Alpha) may have been the first one to visually acquire the hostage taker, it taking Alpha team – the team that put the terrorist down and which went in directly through the front door – as long to breach for some reason. We will never know had Delta-Alpha been able to take an earlier shot with top-shelf NVGs whether Lindt may have turned out differently – had

he been equipped with NVGs that allowed him to see in the near total darkness while protecting him with an auto-shut out function from the temporary blinding flashes of the flashbangs. Operator B of the same team endured the same flashbang backfires and also lacked hearing protection. As physically tired but not blinded as he was not wearing NVGs. He was, however, deafened when he entered the gunman's room, B also lacked a visible laser aimer on his weapon. Not having a laser aimer for the night assault in the completely darkened café was a severe handicap and cost time, and time in hostage recovery is vital.

The very first operator in the room, Alpha 2 from the team that went in through the front glass-doors and the ballistic shield bearer, neither had a visible laser aimer on his Glock handgun nor a functioning

GIVEN THE TACTICAL REALITY, THE TOU LACKED THE KIT TO NAVIGATE THE HURDLE TACTICALLY

radio, which had died at the very start of the siege and which could not be replaced for lack of spares. Quite possibly because he lacked a visible laser aimer, he chose not to fire his smaller calibre weapon, unable to get a clean sight picture in the dark (the importance of a visible laser aimer for one-handed weapon use while employing heavy ballistic shields simultaneously cannot be overstated). Alpha 2 also slipped on shattered glass upon entry because the TOU used a shotgun round to break the door/glass, thus large, slippery shards remained underfoot. Had they used an explosive to breach the glass, debris on the floor would not have been there or would have been fine, dust-sized particles much less likely to be slipped on.

CRITICAL EQUIPMENT ISSUES

No radio to relay the first target indication from the first operator in the room and no laser sight for the night assault, the first person in the room after being on station for 16 hours, on duty at 7am the day of after finishing a 'job' at midnight the night before, wearing 25kg of gear in all-black overalls in the Australian summer heat and carrying a 17kg ballistic shield – this was the man Australia sent into the Lindt Café first. With Officers A and B, these are the men Australia sent into the fray first, a systemic failure where the first three men in the room experienced critical equipment issues and unnecessary physical duress. The operator that shot Monis second did so five times and also didn't have a laser aimer.

Communication equipment employed failed at the most critical times – the notification by snipers that one of the hostages was being placed on his knees and a gun raised to his head and the order to breach. The PBIED meanwhile meant, despite the UK report's comfort with controlling fluid battles and the determination the number of flashbangs to be used in any action need be defined and adhered to pre-entry, the TOU had to overkill on the flashbangs. It was all they could do given the hostages and bomb

catalyst. But given this tactical reality they lacked the kit to navigate the hurdle tactically. No electronic hearing protection equipment combined with their already out-dated communication headsets. No NVGs with auto light shut off capability. No lasers on critical weapon sets, first in handgun and second to fire rifle (only one officer in Delta team had a visible M4 laser aimer). Not all officers were seen wearing ballistic eyewear either, and the second TOU operator to engage Monis (one of only two) sustained ricochet facial injuries around the cheek. How near the eye is unknown, but it may have been absorbed with the proper eyewear during the breach from bullet ricochets at the critical moment of entry and return fire from Monis, and again may have

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been the key to a better outcome.

The New South Wales State Government does its best to fund its teams, but ultimately counter-terrorism preparation and response is a Federal concern. There is no realistic way any State Government in Australia, Europe or North America can afford to maintain an A Grade counter-terrorism capability in and of itself due to the funding requirements of Tier One assets. State police forces

will, however, continue to remain the first responders given the speed of modern terrorism. Had the TOU operators had top-shelf communications, laser sights, NVGs and hearing and eye protection the final assault may very well have ended far more favourably.

A PERFECT STORM OF FAILURE

What happened at Lindt can be reduced to the final few seconds and the perfect storm of Federal failings. Australia needs to defund the domestic military counter-terrorism programme and re-task it to the Federal and State police teams, something akin to the FBI-created and led Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell basically, for domestic and overseas operations like the German GSG9. Had the Federal Government ensured all the country's policing tactical teams were given at least the exact same training and resources as its military teams, had the most difficult, most unlikely to be employed option not been prioritised funding and resources, Lindt might have turned out very differently.

Trending in the opposite direction to Europe (bar France) and North America, the Australian Government's response to Lindt and the UK expert report is developing contrarily, opting to paralegalise the military option as a cheaper, easier, more populist alternative to fully paramilitarising at least Federal law-enforcement agencies. One can only hope the UK report influences the concluded coronial enquiry to recommend the more mature, less self-defeating UK model over the for-show French model of military patrols on French streets, effectively bringing the war home... every, single, day ●

Doctor Allan Orr is a counter terrorism and counter insurgency specialist who is currently researching and writing on the Sydney siege.

Communication proved to be a major issue

