

## Review of the report of an Inquiry into National Recognition of our Armed Forces

By Roger Green, Principal Reviewer, U K Defence Forum

This short report (the Inquiry having been led by Quentin Davies MP at the request of the Prime Minister) is a good 'across the board' review of the current state of relations between the armed forces and the civilian society within which they are established. Whilst the armed forces are well recognised as an entity, the report did raise the question as to how well they were understood personally, their way of life or their choice of career. However, having raised that specific issue, the focus of the subsequent recommendations seems more concerned with promoting understanding of the armed forces as uniformed units within society rather than addressing the means of better understanding the role of the individual and their life in the forces.

The introduction did not address the military culture in this country that might be thought of as a surprising omission. The British have a long-standing military history back to Boadicea and the occupation by the Romans and the Vikings. That military tradition is ingrained into the British psyche and in the 15 years or so after World War II it is certain that there would have been no need for this type of report. Since that time immigration from non old-Commonwealth countries has increasingly diluted the core of the British nation. Those immigrants do not have the same sense or depth of military history and, as they have permeated throughout British life and taken positions of authority and influence, it is not surprising that they do not act with or possess an ingrained understanding of the traditional position of the armed forces in British society. Concurrently, an increasingly smaller proportion of the British population is serving in the armed forces. Consequently, the armed forces are not in the forefront of the public conscience. The report acknowledges that to a large extent the armed forces have been 'hidden from public sight' due to the terrorist threat since the 1970s.

The recommendations for increasing visibility are all soundly based but will need a directed change in the culture and the law, as well as changes in attitudes by local authorities. Some aspects of the low profile of the armed forces are the direct result of enforced financial savings and a lack of high level will to promote and publicise the forces achievements. To correct this situation will inevitably entail financial costs that should be borne at a national level to reflect the national role of the forces. The recommendations for improving contact, if organised on a coherent basis, will make a significant contribution to changing the national culture. The potential of the Reserve Forces to play a more important role in this respect is possibly underrated by the report. The use of networked factual and documentary television programmes (not fly-on-the-wall programmes) about the forces for wider public 'education' is not addressed. Presently the majority of these kinds of programmes that are generally of a high standard are normally regional and shown in late-night time slots. Other nations show programmes produced by the military for showing in regular time slots.

The recommendations for building understanding are comprehensive and if fully adopted should have a marked impact. It is not surprising that the media regards the forces as defensive and cautious, as the military have over a long time been restricted in their ability to speak out individually, and are required to be extremely circumspect in dealings with the media. Also, it is relatively recent that media skill has been recognised as a necessary ability for a wide selection of personnel. However, there is a need to guard against the military operating to one set of media guidelines in peacetime and having to follow a different set of rules when there is a crisis. The recommendation to extend the Armed Forces Scheme to journalists will be good for relations and understanding. Although not addressed, the government in dealing with this report might wish to consider whether this scheme might be extended to advantage to include Coroners. Over the past year or two there have been a number of occasions when Coroners have publicised their views on military matters at an inquest. Military people have frequently seen these views as an expression of ignorance by the Coroners concerned, as they speak from a position of no military experience. As a consequence, the MoD and the government have in some instances been faced with defending themselves against widely reported criticisms based more on emotion than fact.

The extent of the recommendations encouraging support is surprisingly minimal and with little depth or new ideas. A disappointing aspect of this report is the little attention given to veterans. Whilst the report acknowledges Veterans Day and proposes that it should be incorporated into a British Armed Forces Day, the relatively small number of veterans who have applied for their Veterans Badge shows the communications gulf and maybe attitudes between veterans and the government on veterans issues. Undoubtedly this reflects the poor state of the Government's system for tracking veterans as there are no official government records for veterans. The recommendation for a Veterans ID card reflects a long-standing view of retirees and the lack of an ID card has without doubt coloured the view of many veterans that they have retired 'out of sight and out of mind'. There is no mention of health care for veterans and UK veterans can only look with envy at the comprehensive veterans support organisations in other countries. As the authors of this report claimed to have consulted the SSAFA and Army Benevolent Fund, (but not the Royal Navy or the RAF Benevolent Funds) it is surprising that there is little reflection in the report of their welfare roles or how they might be enhanced as part of a coherent UK veterans support organisation.

The report has brought to prominence the whole issue of the recognition of our armed forces in a country that has enjoyed a stable culture but which is now undergoing considerable change. Our armed forces are engaged in more operations in remote countries than ever before and need the support of a public that does not always understand or is politically opposed to the foreign policy arguments of involvement. The report makes it clear that there is a wide scope for positive action to facilitate public recognition and for the armed forces to feel that they are an integral, valued and respected part of national life.