

# Chapter 4

## Responses to Crisis

Circumstances in Fiji began to change quickly over the weekend of 16–17 May. On Saturday an estimated crowd of 3000 Indians conducted a protest in the capital, Suva, and there were reports of protests elsewhere. Indian leaders called for an indefinite general strike until the Bavadra Government was restored to power. A strike would paralyse the economy, disrupt the supply of food, fuel and power and increase racial tension considerably.<sup>1</sup> A journalist smuggled out a letter from the beleaguered Dr Timoci Bavadra calling for Australian and New Zealand intervention to restore democracy in Fiji and reinstate his government.<sup>2</sup> New Zealand's Prime Minister, David Lange, now had 'a cry [for help] from a legitimate government'. Fiji's Chief Justice and all the Supreme Court Justices declared Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's suspension of the constitution illegal. A political confrontation was shaping up between Rabuka and his Council of Ministers on the one hand (who represented traditional Fijian elites), and the Governor General and the judiciary on the other (who represented the rule of law, the constitution and democracy). On the streets and in townships throughout Fiji, a more bare-knuckled confrontation between Indians and Fijians appeared to be on the horizon.

The *Sun-Herald* in Melbourne warned of a coming crisis with the headline, 'Fiji Set to Erupt—Fear of Racial Bloodbath'.<sup>3</sup> In continuing efforts to muzzle critical media comment on the coup, Rabuka ordered Fijian soldiers to detain another Australian journalist, Frank Walker, at gunpoint.<sup>4</sup> Other Australian newspapers were less strident about eruptions of racial violence, but also suggested that, until the political future of Fiji was resolved, violence would increase.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Australian Liberal Senator Robert Hill, who was attending an international conference in Suva, pointed out that the only delegates concerned about the coup were from Central and South America, and they had left Fiji immediately. He observed that all other delegates and tourists at the convention hotel appeared to be untroubled and were enjoying themselves.<sup>6</sup>

This was the Hawke Government's first major regional political crisis. Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke recalled later that he found 'an amusing excess of enthusiasm' for intervening militarily in Fiji's affairs by his Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, and acting Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, whom he described as 'two Rambos'. He laughed off their suggestions for using a navy helicopter to pluck Bavadra from the New Zealand High Commission, to where it was rumoured he had escaped.<sup>7</sup> Hawke commented that the look on the face

of the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), General Peter Gration, when this proposal was discussed, was sufficient alone to persuade him that this course of action was folly.<sup>8</sup>

By Sunday 17 May 1987 the Australian Government was on the record as condemning the coup as undemocratic, but at the same time ruling out a military response to restore the Bavadra Government. By coincidence, the Commander in Chief of the RFMF, Brigadier Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, was in Australia at the time of the coup, having attended a ceremony in Perth where the Australian Government handed over patrol boats to the Government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) as part of the South Pacific Defence Cooperation Program. Apparently, confidential discussions took place with him over the possible redeployment of the RFMF troops located in the Middle East back to Fiji.<sup>9</sup> The Fiji Governor General did not support this redeployment.<sup>10</sup> The prospect of complicating the situation with the return of supposedly 'loyalist' troops, let alone the logistical effort required to do so at short notice, would also have been enough to scuttle this response option. After dismissing military options, Mike Steketee, senior political commentator for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported that the Australian Government's strategy was to strongly condemn the coup, encourage international pressure for a return to democracy in Fiji and to refuse to extend diplomatic recognition.<sup>11</sup> Paul Kelly, Steketee's counterpart at *The Australian*, reported that the Hawke Government was mobilising opinion and not the military.<sup>12</sup>

The British Commonwealth connection gave countries in the region a mechanism for both consultation and leverage in Fiji. Hawke would pursue this avenue subsequently.<sup>13</sup> The South Pacific Forum was another mechanism for intervening in the Fijian crisis. Its annual meeting, due to take place at the end of June 1987, was a possible forum for consolidating a regional response under Australian and New Zealand leadership. There appeared to be no political advantages for elected governments in the South Pacific to condone or ignore a successful military coup in the region.<sup>14</sup> At dawn on Monday 18 May 1987, groups of Fijian soldiers conducted raids on the hotel rooms of several Australian journalists and took them into custody at gunpoint.<sup>15</sup> *The Australian* headline was 'Tension Mounts'. Malcom Brown, reporting from Suva, wrote, 'At 12.55 p.m. Fijians started bashing Indians', adding that Indians had begun to set sugar cane fields on fire.<sup>16</sup>

Events in Fiji since the coup became news on the evening of 14 May had not escaped the notice of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) tactical level of command in Townsville. Major Gary Stone, Second-In-Command, 1 RAR, the battalion in 3rd Brigade that was on standby for emergencies, asked the Brigade Major, Major Peter Pursey, on Friday 15 May to make enquiries about whether he should be preparing the 154-strong Advance Company Group (ACG) to protect

and coordinate an evacuation of Australian nationals from Fiji, should the need arise.<sup>17</sup> The battalion had an obligation to keep the ACG on seven days' notice to move. Stone assessed that the situation in Fiji was volatile and troops might be needed immediately. Pursey called back and told Stone that Brigadier Mick Harris, Chief of Staff at the newly renamed Land Headquarters in Sydney, had directed that notice to move for the ACG should not be reduced, and no preparations were to be made. Furthermore, Stone was to discourage any activity or rumour that might suggest Australia was preparing troops for intervention into Fiji.<sup>18</sup> At the time, Hawke, Beazley, the Defence Secretary, Alan Woods, and Gration, as well as the three Service chiefs were heading for Perth to attend a ceremony to hand over a patrol boat to PNG as part of the Pacific Patrol Boat program on Saturday 16 May 1987.

Colonel Adrian D'Hage, Director Joint Operations and Plans, Headquarters Australian Defence Force (HQ ADF), wrote later:

It was apparent within HQ ADF that if, as a result of the coup, civil disorder in Fiji was to break down, the Australian Government would wish to take appropriate steps to safeguard Australian citizens.<sup>19</sup> There was a paramount requirement not to be seen to be interfering in the internal affairs of another sovereign country, counter-balanced by an undisputed obligation of providing protection for Australians overseas.<sup>20</sup> ... Both the Government and the ADF were faced with the difficulty of planning an operation without wishing to invite media speculation as to the probable tasks and preparation of a military force.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, there were competing priorities of obeying international law and meeting obligations to Australian citizens, as well as allowing the ADF enough time to prepare if there were signs that the situation in Fiji was deteriorating. In secrecy, staff at HQ ADF considered options on Saturday 16 May for evacuating 4000–5000 Australian nationals from Fiji based on assessments of the situation from the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). After Beazley, Gration and Woods had returned to Canberra from Perth on Sunday 17 May, staff from JIO briefed them 'at around midnight', prompting Beazley to direct that 'formal options for the evacuation of Australian nationals be developed'.<sup>22</sup>

On Monday 18 May 1987, staff at HQ ADF developed maritime and air options for evacuation operations. They were based on assumptions of cooperation from Fijian authorities and military and police forces. There were concerns, however, that civil unrest might close roads needed by evacuees to move to airports or wharves. The Joint Planning Committee (JPC) convened later that afternoon to design Operation *Morris Dance*. Committee members included an option of employing Australian troops to keep routes open to airports and wharves, and to secure evacuation points. Air Vice Marshal Peter Scully, the Assistant Chief

of the Defence Force (Operations) chaired the JPC. Membership was inter-departmental and included the Chiefs of Staff of Maritime, Land (also called Field Force Command at the time) and Air Commands and representatives from the Service offices (navy, army, and air force) in Canberra.<sup>23</sup>

On Tuesday 19 May 1987, James Oram, a journalist reporting for *The Australian* in Fiji, wrote that the country was 'at a flashpoint after a bridge was bombed, cane fields were set on fire and brawls erupted between Fijians and Indians in the streets of Suva [the capital]'.<sup>24</sup> The day before, his colleague, Brian Woodley, had confirmed that all of the RFMF Reserves had been called out to patrol the streets in response to the planned beginning of a national strike.<sup>25</sup> Matthew Gubb wrote later that shots were heard as the Indians went on strike, bringing the sugar industry to a standstill.<sup>26</sup> The editorial in *The Australian* warned that Fiji could sink into anarchy, autocracy or civil war if there was no early return to constitutional government. Steketee offered: 'Australia might have to swallow hard and, as it did on the case of the Indonesian take over of Timor, accept reality and extend de facto recognition, followed sometime later by formal diplomatic recognition'.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Steketee revealed that officials at DFAT were not only drawing up plans for economic sanctions against Fiji but also crafting a 'RAN evacuation plan', with five navy ships already on standby in Fijian waters.<sup>28</sup> Though Hawke had rejected military intervention to restore the political situation, he remained cognisant of his government's obligations to Australians located in Fiji and to the expectations of allies, such as New Zealand and the United States, that Australia would take the lead in any evacuation operation.<sup>29</sup> However, this recognition did not include allowing for military preparation. Hawke and Beazley were reluctant to give permission in case such preparations were misinterpreted as a military intervention, rather than an evacuation operation.<sup>30</sup> Possibly, whoever was briefing Steketee on the Government's intentions was creating a media story that military planning was only for emergency evacuation operations.

By Tuesday 19 May 1987, events in Fiji had the potential to overtake the methodical workings of the Australian Government's crisis machinery and the ADF planning process. The JPC had no authority to issue warning orders to the Services to be prepared to make force elements available to the CDF for evacuation operations in Fiji. Orders could only be issued with the authority of the CDF, after consultation with the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). The COSC, augmented with the Secretary and additional senior ADF officers and defence officials, met on the morning of 20 May 1987. While members of COSC considered an appreciation of the situation by members of the JPC, New Zealand announced that a New Zealand Defence Force group was on standby to evacuate 1800 New Zealand nationals if they were endangered by increasing civil unrest.<sup>31</sup> The media was broadcasting images of crowds setting buildings on fire and looting,

as well as Fijian troops bashing Indians with rifle butts to break up increasingly violent demonstrations against the coup.

Members of COSC preferred an evacuation by civil aircraft coordinated by Australian High Commission staff in Fiji. However, Gration concluded 'In [my] view, the situation had already deteriorated to such an extent that it was presently a questionable course.'<sup>32</sup> The COSC put aside the option of deploying an infantry company to assist with an evacuation for the time being: 'Until Government had made a decision [about conducting an evacuation], no higher state of readiness order was to be issued to the ODF [Operational Deployment Force], and planning was to be confined to Army Office in Canberra'.<sup>33</sup>

This order was carried out to the letter after Pursey, on behalf of Brigadier Peter Arnison, Commander 3rd Brigade, asked Harris once again for permission to reduce the notice to move for the ACG in light of the New Zealand announcement and the apparent worsening situation in Fiji. Harris ordered him emphatically not to initiate any activity at 1 RAR that might spawn speculation about Australia intervening with military force.<sup>34</sup>

Political sensitivity about being discovered preparing troops in Townsville should be seen in light of maritime tensions between Fiji and Australia at the time. Fijian military officers supporting the coup 'had become suspicious of Australian military intentions' and, on the evening of Monday 18 May 1987, a Fijian patrol boat, HMFS *Kira*, had challenged HMAS *Stalwart*, a supply ship, at sea.<sup>35</sup> At 1.00 p.m. Tuesday 19 May, the Fijian Naval Division Commander informed the Australian High Commission in Suva that Australian ships berthed in Suva had overstayed their diplomatic clearances and, if they did not sail immediately, their presence would be construed as a hostile act. Feelings were running high between two normally cooperative and friendly navies. Technically, the Fijian coup leaders in the RFMF were threatening action against Australian ships. That night, Fijian authorities formally challenged HMAS *Sydney*, a frigate berthed in Suva, for not having a diplomatic clearance. All Australian ships departed from Fijian waters in the early hours of 20 May to avoid an escalation of tensions over their presence in Fijian ports.<sup>36</sup>

By this time there had been a mix of positive and negative developments in Fiji as violence increased and the Governor General, whom Queen Elizabeth had told to stand firm, negotiated with Rabuka and his Council of Ministers.<sup>37</sup> One unhelpful event had occurred when an Indian man hijacked an Air New Zealand 747 jet on the tarmac at Nadi Airport early on Tuesday 19 May 1987. This situation distracted planners in both Australia and New Zealand, and interrupted negotiations. Fortunately, the hijacker surrendered to authorities at 1.30 p.m. local time. At 4.00 p.m. the Governor General addressed the Great Council of Chiefs in an effort to achieve a compromise that would facilitate a reconciliation process towards drafting a new constitution and conducting new elections. The

prospects of Bavadra and members of his coalition being released increased when the Governor General agreed to swear in Rabuka's Council of Ministers as a new Council of Advisors until the conduct of a new election in what was reported as a 'secret compromise'.<sup>38</sup> At 10.00 p.m. soldiers released Bavadra and his colleagues. Bavadra did not ease tensions. He angrily told waiting media representatives that he was still the Prime Minister and that Rabuka should be tried for treason.<sup>39</sup> It now remained to be seen whether Bavadra's release and the Governor General's secret compromise would cool or inflame tensions between the Indian and Fijian communities, and also whether the newly-promoted Colonel Rabuka and his RFMF forces were controlling Suva's streets.

Later on the morning of Wednesday 20 May, the ADF strategic and operational levels of command issued the first formal orders for Operation *Morris Dance*. The first order was to assign army landing craft to HMAS *Tobruk*, the navy's heavy landing ship that was alongside at the Garden Island fleet base in Sydney.<sup>40</sup> At 1.00 p.m. the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), Lieutenant General Laurie O'Donnell, directed Harris, who was acting Land Commander at the time, to put landing craft and crews as well as a detachment of communications personnel under command of the officer commanding the ship's 15-strong army detachment, who was aboard HMAS *Tobruk*.<sup>41</sup> Land Headquarters staff gave crews from Chowder Bay on Sydney Harbour and a detachment of signallers from Holsworthy in Sydney, who were not on any formal notice to move for offshore deployment, four hours' warning to get themselves, their craft and vehicles as well as their equipment on board.<sup>42</sup> At 9.00 p.m. the Maritime Commander, Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair, signalled that he would exercise 'full command' over all maritime force elements assigned to Operation *Morris Dance*.<sup>43</sup> This action conformed to General Sir Phillip Bennett's March directive and sidelined O'Donnell and Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Vice-Admiral Mike Hudson, from operational command of HMAS *Tobruk* and its embarked army elements. At 2.00 a.m. on 21 May 1987, Gration's staff issued a directive to the environmental commanders for the conduct of Operation *Morris Dance*.<sup>44</sup> He did not nominate a joint force commander because Cabinet had not decided whether there would be an evacuation and, if ordered, whether it would be by sea or air. Gration issued a further directive 30 minutes later to the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Jim Newham, to assign aircraft to the Air Commander, Air Vice Marshal Ted Radford, thus completing the removal of all of the Service chiefs from the operational command over force elements assigned to Operation *Morris Dance*.<sup>45</sup>

In reality, however, each Service chief was still involved because Gration's directives, informed by Bennett's March directive, obligated them to provide logistic support.<sup>46</sup> Accepting that logistic support is a function of command, the joint force commander—either the Maritime Commander or Air Commander—would have to be supported by a joint logistic component

commander once Gration decided on who would command the operation. However, there was no mechanism for appointing a joint logistic commander or for assigning the effort of logistic force elements or infrastructure from the Services to a joint force commander for offshore operations. Thus, Gration had to include the Service chiefs in support of Operation *Morris Dance*, using their processes and procedures as well as logistic support assets, such as supply depots, distribution agencies, bases and airfields.

None of the orders on 20 May or the early morning of 21 May 1987 authorised any reduction in the notice to move for the ACG, despite the increased readiness of navy vessels and aircraft to conduct evacuation operations with army landing craft embarked on HMAS *Tobruk*.<sup>47</sup> For his part, Harris once again reinforced his orders with an insistent Arnison on 20 May prohibiting any preparations in 3rd Brigade.<sup>48</sup> For their parts, Gration and Woods, briefed Beazley and the Acting Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, after the COSC meeting on 20 May, about options for evacuation, but did not include reference to employing an ODF infantry company.<sup>49</sup>

Cabinet reportedly met on the morning of 21 May 1987 and decided that Australia should have troops on standby at sea for evacuation operations.<sup>50</sup> According to Gration, the Maritime Commander, Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair, prompted his sudden decision to embark the ACG on ships as part of Australia's 'contingency deployment' to the waters off Fiji after he assessed that there would be insufficient numbers of personnel from ships' companies to coordinate an evacuation of several thousand people.<sup>51</sup> He asked Gration to make troops available to assist. As a result, seven days after the coup and one day after again prohibiting any specific force preparation, Harris directed Arnison by telephone to have the ACG ready to deploy by air to Norfolk Island by that afternoon in preparation for transfer to HMAS *Tobruk* and HMAS *Success* on their way to Fiji.<sup>52</sup> This was the only location *en route* to transfer an infantry company with vehicles and equipment to ships.<sup>53</sup>

Reflecting the Hawke Government's assessment of the Fijian situation or possibly only his own, Evans commented to the media that there might be a 20 per cent likelihood that law and order in Fiji could break down completely.<sup>54</sup> This quantification suggests that Evans may have been echoing a JIO assessment as well as that of the High Commission in Fiji or that it was his personal assessment derived from information from military and diplomatic sources.

Serious rioting erupted during the night of 21 May 1987, and there was the prospect of more violence in the coming days. The Great Council of Chiefs was taking time to agree to the Governor General's arrangements for an interim government. The release of members of the Bavadra Government did not appear to have helped ease the violence. Gangs of Fijians went on the rampage, injuring scores of Indians, looting and vandalising their shops and smashing glass

windows. They attacked Indians at random in frenzied assaults. James Oram reported that Fijian troops had fired at praying protesters.<sup>55</sup> Australian journalists described 20 May as Suva's bloodiest day and that rioting appeared to be at a turning point—either it had peaked and would subside, or it would increase.<sup>56</sup> Milton Cockburn, reporting for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, revealed that the Australian Cabinet would be finalising evacuation plans for Australians from Fiji on Thursday 21 May 1987.

Meanwhile, Stone and his men had arrived at the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base in Townsville in the early morning dark (at 5.00 a.m.) on Thursday 21 May in anticipation of a 6.30 a.m. departure. However, the loading of their stores and vehicles (which had arrived at the base several hours earlier) was not proceeding satisfactorily. After four C-130 *Hercules* transport aircraft had arrived later than expected, ground staff discovered that there were insufficient ramp pallets or experienced air movements specialists to load the aircraft efficiently.<sup>57</sup> In the haste to make up time, ground staff loaded the 1 RAR duty officer's vehicle with a full fuel tank, the wrong way round, instead of a Landrover that had been pre-prepared for air transportation.<sup>58</sup>

After receiving maps of Fiji 30 minutes before final boarding, the contingent began lifting off one and a half hours later than orders had specified. Three aircraft departed at 7.30 a.m., 8.15 a.m. and 8.50 a.m. After take-off at 8.30 a.m., the other aircraft that was transporting Stone and his headquarters staff had to return to Townsville. The crew discovered a leakage of fuel from the 1 RAR duty officer's vehicle. If this leak had not been detected, the fuel may have been ignited in flight from sparks from an electrical fault or some other source of combustion. Air force crew were also to discover a small Butane gas stove in a Non Commissioned Officer (NCO)'s pack leaking in this aircraft after its next take-off—undiscovered, it would have exploded at altitude with 'catastrophic' consequences.<sup>59</sup> The owner had packed the stove in his pack 36 hours before in anticipation of a road trip to a training area, not a high-altitude air move to an operation in the South Pacific, and had forgotten about it. Stone's aircraft took off a second time, but had to return again when crew discovered another Landrover fuel leak. Stone and his headquarters staff finally departed for Norfolk Island at 9.30 a.m.,<sup>60</sup> arriving four hours after the first aircraft had landed. Major Vince Walsh, a liaison officer from Land Headquarters, who had arrived at Norfolk Island the day before, met him.<sup>61</sup> Walsh, who had not been issued independent secure communications equipment prior to his departure from Sydney, was communicating and coordinating activities as well as reporting back to Land Headquarters through the local telephone exchange. All was not going well.

The navy had not been able to provide a liaison officer to the contingent who could have advised on what lay ahead for the transfer of personnel, vehicles

and stocks to HMAS *Success* and HMAS *Tobruk* at Norfolk Island. Already tired, troops unpacked containers and redistributed their contents by hand into smaller and lighter loads because the army's storage containers were too heavy to be lifted full' by the navy's *Wessex* helicopter.<sup>62</sup> The helicopter flew the contingent's stores from shore to ship as slung loads. Lieutenant Colonel John P. Salter wrote later that, 'had the storage arrangements aboard HMAS *Success* been known, [that particular container] would not have been used'.<sup>63</sup> Small civilian lighters, crewed by Norfolk Islanders, ferried the two Landrovers.<sup>64</sup> 'It was only the clemency of the weather that made the job possible.'<sup>65</sup> 'This was a difficult task and it was surprising that a craft did not capsize.'<sup>66</sup>

HMAS *Tobruk* arrived offshore at 10.00 p.m. on Thursday 21 May 1987. Utility helicopters picked the contingent up from shore and transferred them to the ship in the dark. This transfer was another risky activity because the helicopters 'were not equipped for night flying over water, which made height extremely difficult to judge'. Gubb, attributing an anonymous source in Maritime Headquarters, added that, 'with the exception of the senior pilot, the air crews were not current for flying their helicopters at night'.<sup>67</sup> After the weary infantrymen arrived, 'reception on HMAS *Tobruk* was slow, with individuals having to unpack and store weapons, ammunition, pyrotechnics and hexamine in separate stowage, on an unfamiliar ship, in the dark early hours of the morning'.<sup>68</sup>

There was another risky transfer of personnel two days later at sea. HMAS *Tobruk* was due to be present at a meeting of representatives from Pacific Forum countries in Apia, the capital of Samoa. As a consequence, the contingent, many of whom had been suffering from sea sickness, had to be transferred to other vessels in the Operation *Morris Dance* task group on 26 May—a very windy day.<sup>69</sup> Helicopter load masters winched down troops from hovering helicopters onto rolling decks in challenging conditions; a first time for the soldiers, UH-1B helicopter pilots and their loadmasters as well as for the crews from HMAS *Parramatta* and HMAS *Adelaide*. During this transfer, three helicopters became unserviceable and another crashed onto the deck of HMAS *Tobruk*.<sup>70</sup> Fortunately, no one was injured.

Norfolk Island had surgical facilities (including a hospital) which could have been used in case of any accidents and injuries during the transfer from shore to ship. However, during the transshipment of troops at sea, there was no surgeon, anaesthetist or surgical facilities on any of the ships in the Operation *Morris Dance* task group.<sup>71</sup> Given his expectation of an unopposed evacuation, Gratton had assessed a surgical capacity as unnecessary.<sup>72</sup>

Hindsight should not disguise the potentially difficult task that would have faced Stone and his men if the situation in Fiji had deteriorated further and he

had been ordered to protect as well as to assist Australian High Commission staff to coordinate an evacuation of 4000–5000 frightened people. His orders from Land Headquarters specified that Stone and his 105 infantrymen had ‘to control, coordinate and administer personnel for evacuation; provide escorts for movement of civilian groups; marshal civilians at concentration points; provide communications on shore; defend Australian assets [in Fiji] and provide support to AUSCOM FIJI [Australian High Commission]’.<sup>73</sup> Land Headquarters, presumably in consultation with O’Donnell’s staff at Army Office in Canberra, had elaborated on General Gration’s supplementation of a maritime contingency deployment by specifying generic evacuation tasks that would be expected of the company group during a protected evacuation—a worse case scenario that Gration was not anticipating.<sup>74</sup>

Salter, Stone’s commanding officer, wrote later that higher levels of command had not appreciated ‘the complexity of this [overall] task’.<sup>75</sup> He assessed that only one of the tasks specified in Stone’s orders could have been attempted by the depleted ACG. A minimum of two additional company groups would have been required before an evacuation operation could have been attempted. Only one follow-on company had been put on 24 hours’ notice to move from Townsville after the ACG had left.<sup>76</sup> He opined: ‘The [evacuation] task will only be required when law and order has broken down. The spectre of 1000 people of mixed race [presumably Indians fleeing violence] attempting to get a seat on an aircraft designed for 200 should be imagined.’<sup>77</sup> The unserviceability of helicopters in transit had also reduced the capacity of the task group to transfer troops from ship to shore (to nine soldiers at a time in two helicopters), thus making rapid concentration of force impossible.<sup>78</sup> For his part, if Gration had received information that Australian troops might have to operate in more dangerous circumstances, he would have ordered the deployment of more of them to create a deterrent presence.<sup>79</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, the difficulties the three Services encountered in deploying Stone’s contingent suggested that rapid reinforcement at sea or on the ground in Fiji would have been problematic.

The situation in Fiji stabilised rather than deteriorated during the deployment phase of Operation *Morris Dance*, as Gration had anticipated, and there was no evacuation. Indeed, hundreds of nationals, who had wished to leave Fiji, flew out on commercial aircraft with the assistance of Fijian authorities.<sup>80</sup> Stone and his men were back in Australia by 7 June 1987, 15 days after they had flown to Norfolk Island. Their adventures would not go down in Australian military history as a benchmark for joint force projection. It was now up to the ADF to examine what went wrong and apply the lessons—thankfully, these important lessons had manifested without mission failure, loss of life or serious injury.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Patrick Walters, 'Indians could strangle the economy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Tony Stephens, Patrick Walters, Malcom Brown and Mary Louise O'Callaghan, 'Judges Challenge Rabuka', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Correspondents, 'Fiji Set to Erupt—Fear of Racial Bloodbath', *Sun Herald*, 17 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Correspondents, 'Fiji Set to Erupt—Fear of Racial Bloodbath', *Sun Herald*, 17 May 1987, p. 2.
- <sup>5</sup> James Oram and Brian Woodley (in Suva), 'Fijian Soldiers stop our writers; papers closed', *Weekend Australian*, 16–17 May 1987, p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Danielle Robinson, 'Robert Hill unperturbed by coup', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 1987, p. 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert J. Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs*, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 329–30.
- <sup>8</sup> Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs*, pp. 329–30.
- <sup>9</sup> Mike Steketee, 'Why Canberra accepts Rabuka's regime as a fact of life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Steketee, 'Why Canberra accepts Rabuka's regime as a fact of life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Steketee, 'Why Canberra accepts Rabuka's regime as a fact of life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Kelly, 'Hawke mobilises opinion instead of the military', *The Australian*, 18 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs*, p. 330.
- <sup>14</sup> See Matthew Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fiji Coup: An Assessment*, SDSC Working Paper, no. 171, Strategic Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, November 1988.
- <sup>15</sup> See Tony Stephens, 'Reporter: Rifle at nose persuasive', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 5; and James Oram, 'Dictatorship tightens its grip in dawn raids', *The Australian*, 18 May 1987, p. 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Malcom Brown, 'An ugly scrimmage in Fiji', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Gary J. Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997. See G.J. Stone, personal diary entry of 15 May 1987 (copy held by author). Lieutenant Colonel John P. Salter, CO 1 RAR, was in northwest Australia attending an exercise at the time.
- <sup>18</sup> Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997.
- <sup>19</sup> Colonel Adrian S. D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance* : An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', *Defence Force Journal*, no. 80, January/February 1990, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', p. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', p. 8.
- <sup>22</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', p. 6.
- <sup>23</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', pp. 5–7. D'Hage describes the 'High Command Planning Sequence' in these pages.
- <sup>24</sup> James Oram, 'Bomb, brawling push Fiji to the brink', *The Australian*, 19 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Brian Woodley, 'Fiji troops called out for general strike', *The Australian*, 18 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Steketee, 'Five RAN ships on Standby', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1987, p. 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Steketee, 'Five RAN ships on Standby', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1987, p. 2.
- <sup>29</sup> See Alan Fewster, 'Hawke rules out 'Rambo-like' military action', *The Australian*, 19 May 1987, p. 8; and Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, pp. 1 and 8.
- <sup>30</sup> General Peter C. Gratton in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- <sup>31</sup> JPC Report 2/87, 'Appreciation of the Situation in Fiji', 19 May 1987, 87–22646, Defence Archives, Queanbeyan. Australian Associated Press report, quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1987, p. 10.
- <sup>32</sup> COSC Minute 27/87 (Agendum 16/87 refers), Meeting Wednesday 20 May 1987, paragraph 19. Defence Archives, Queanbeyan.
- <sup>33</sup> COSC Minute 27/87 (Agendum 16/87 refers), Meeting Wednesday 20 May 1987, paragraph 19. Defence Archives, Queanbeyan.

## Struggling for Self Reliance

- <sup>34</sup> Brigadier Brian R. Dawson to author, 29 September 2004. Dawson was a member of the operations staff at Land Headquarters and recalled being in the operations room when Harris spoke with Pursey and told him forcefully not to reduce the notice to move for the ACG and not to make preparations.
- <sup>35</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', p. 7.
- <sup>36</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', pp. 7–8.
- <sup>37</sup> Yvonne Preston, 'The Queen to GG: stand firm', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1987, p. 6.
- <sup>38</sup> Tony Stephens, Patrick Walters and Mary Louise O'Callaghan, 'Secret deal: timetable to end coup', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1987, p. 1; and Peter Hastings, 'Colonel Rabuka's coup has succeeded', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>39</sup> Herald Reporters, 'I'm still PM says freed Bavadra', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> HMAS *Tobruk*, known as a Landing Ship Heavy, was the first purpose-built major amphibious ship in the navy. The vessel was commissioned in 1981 and designed to carry troops (350–550), vehicles and stores, and put them ashore without the aid of port facilities.
- <sup>41</sup> Signal was issued at 10.24 a.m. on 20 May 1987. Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-1, Attached to Air Vice Marshal P.J. Scully, Assistant Chief of the Defence Force (Operations), Operational [sic] *Morrisdance* —Post Action Report, 15 December 1987, 87–25649. Defence Archives, Queanbeyan.
- <sup>42</sup> D'Hage, 'Operation *Morrisdance*: An Outline History of the Involvement of the Australian Defence Force in the Fiji Crisis of May 1987', p. 9. The communications detachment almost did not make it. They arrived soon after *Tobruk* had sailed and were loaded on *Success*.
- <sup>43</sup> Maritime Headquarters Signal, 201050ZMAY87. Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-2. Copy held by author.
- <sup>44</sup> General Peter C. Gration, CDF Directive 16/1987, 201206ZMAY87, Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-2. Copy held by author.
- <sup>45</sup> General Peter C. Gration, CDF Directive 18/1987, 201227ZMAY87. Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-2. Copy held by author.
- <sup>46</sup> General Peter C. Gration, CDF Directive, 5/87, 12 March 1987, paragraph 5d. See also General Peter C. Gration, CDF Directive 17/1987, 201230ZMAY1987, which ordered Chief of the Air Staff to provide support to Air Commander Australia 'as required'; and CDF Directive 18/1987, 201230ZMAY87, which ordered the Chief of the General Staff to provide logistic support to Land Commander Australia, 'as required'. Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-2. Copy held by author.
- <sup>47</sup> On 20 May 1987 air force aircraft were on 12 hours notice to move for an air evacuation (Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. 9). On 20 May, the Maritime Commander had vessels sailing off Fiji and HMAS *Tobruk* was about to sail from Sydney. (Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. 8.)
- <sup>48</sup> Gary J. Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997.
- <sup>49</sup> COSC Minute 25/87.
- <sup>50</sup> Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 6.
- <sup>51</sup> Gration in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- <sup>52</sup> Stone in interview with author, 17 May 1997. Brigadier Brian R. Dawson to author, 29 September 2004.
- <sup>53</sup> Gration in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- <sup>54</sup> Australian Associated Press, 'Evans sets risk factor for evacuation', *Weekend Australian*, 23 May 1987, p. 4.
- <sup>55</sup> James Oram, 'Troops fire at group of praying protesters', *The Australian*, 20 May 1987, p. 9.
- <sup>56</sup> Patrick Walters, Mary Louise O'Callaghan and Malcom Brown, 'Suva's bloodiest day: chiefs delay decision on interim government', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1987, p. 1.
- <sup>57</sup> Lieutenant John P. Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 9.
- <sup>58</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 9.
- <sup>59</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 9.
- <sup>60</sup> Land Headquarters, Operations Log entry, 12 20 PM, 23 May 1987, 291–K1-9, NAA, Sydney.
- <sup>61</sup> LHQ Situation Report 2/87, 212300ZMAY87.

- <sup>62</sup> Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 15.
- <sup>63</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 9.
- <sup>64</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 10.
- <sup>65</sup> Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 15.
- <sup>66</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 10.
- <sup>67</sup> Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 15.
- <sup>68</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 10.
- <sup>69</sup> The navy task group comprised three warships (HMAS *Sydney*, HMAS *Adelaide* and HMAS *Parramatta*), four patrol boats (HMAS *Cessnock*, HMAS *Dubbo*, HMAS *Townsville* and HMAS *Wollongong*) and two support vessels (HMAS *Stalwart* and HMAS *Success*). Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 11.
- <sup>70</sup> See Gubb, *The Australian Military Response to the Fijian Coup: An Assessment*, p. 13; and Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 11.
- <sup>71</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 7.
- <sup>72</sup> Gration, Annotations.
- <sup>73</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 14. Salter quoted these tasks from Land Headquarters' operation order for Operation *Morris Dance* (LANDCOM OPORD 1).
- <sup>74</sup> Gration in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- <sup>75</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 16.
- <sup>76</sup> Annex A to *Morrisdance Post Action Report*, p. A-5.
- <sup>77</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 16.
- <sup>78</sup> Salter, 'Post Deployment Report', p. 15.
- <sup>79</sup> Gration in interview with author, 19 August 2005.
- <sup>80</sup> Paul Dibb, Annotations.