

**SERVING VITAL INTERESTS:
AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIC PLANNING IN PEACE AND WAR**

**AUSTRALIAN ARMY STRATEGIC PLANNING
BETWEEN THE WARS**

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At 11 am on Thursday 22 January 1920 the Australian Minister for Defence, Senator Sir George Pearce, stepped into the conference room at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne to address the assembled group of senior Australian Army officers. Heading the group was Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel, the recently appointed Inspector-General of the Army. Having commanded the famous Desert Mounted Corps in Palestine and Syria in 1917 and 1918, Chauvel was Australia's senior regular soldier. The Chief of the General Staff, Major General Gordon Legge, who had commanded the 2nd Australian Division at Gallipoli and in France in 1916, was absent on duty in Queensland. He was soon to be succeeded as CGS by another officer present in the group—Major General Sir Brudenell White, who during the Great War had been chief of staff of the 1st Division, the 1st Anzac Corps, the Australian Corps and finally the Fifth Army. The group also included Lieutenant General Sir John Monash, the famous commander of the Australian Corps in 1918 and now back in civilian life as an engineer; Major General Sir James McCay, a Melbourne lawyer and the commander of the 5th Division in 1916; and Major General Sir Talbot Hobbs, a Perth architect and the commander of the 5th Division in 1917 and 1918.

This conference of senior officers, which would include Legge once he returned from Queensland, brought together the six most senior generals in the Australian Army. Senator Pearce, a long-serving and experienced Minister for Defence, gave the conference the task of formulating proposals for the military defence of Australia. It was to take into account the international situation following the recent creation of the League of Nations and Australia's new responsibilities in the Pacific, but since finances were limited any such scheme had to be 'within reason'.¹

Of course the conference did not start with a clean sheet of paper. Firstly, it had to consider the structure of the Army which had been in existence for almost 20 years. The broad parameters had been set by the 1903 *Defence Act* which stated that Australian defence would rely on the part-time militia. There would be no permanent army except for the small numbers of officers and NCOs who would be required to train the militia, and the equally small numbers of permanent gunners, plus a few engineers, needed to man the coastal fortresses. There was to be no permanent field force, and the part-time field force was not permitted to serve overseas. Then in 1911 a new defence scheme had been introduced under which all young men were required to undergo compulsory military training on a part-time basis, with the purpose of forming a militia force of some 80,000 men by 1919.

The Great War threw this plan into disarray. A huge force of eventually over 300,000 men, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), was raised by voluntary enlistment for service overseas. Meanwhile, the part-time militia for the defence of Australia was given little priority for resources. Following the war, in June 1919 a committee headed by George Swinburne, of the Defence Business Board of Administration, recommended certain measures to produce a more effective citizen force.² But more direction was needed.

The second matter to be considered by the conference of senior officers was the new strategic situation. As early as 1895, when Japan had defeated China in a short war, the former had been identified as a potential threat. The magnitude of that threat had become more obvious following Japan's success against Russia in 1904-05. But during and following the Great War Japan had gained in strength. Its industries had grown as they provided munitions for the Allies, and they had been awarded mandated territories which extended to about 1000 kilometres north of the Australian territory of New Guinea. The Japanese threat

had been confirmed by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Jellicoe when he visited Australia in 1919 to report on naval defence. Jellicoe concluded that when Britain was involved in conflict in Europe, Japan might invade Australia and seize the Netherlands East Indies and New Guinea.³ Jellicoe recommended close collaboration between the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy.

The report delivered by the conference of senior officers in February 1920 became the Army's most important strategic planning document for the next two decades. It determined the threat, assessed the strategic situation and set out the force structure to deal with it. While governments changed and the defence policy was refined the Army hierarchy hung on dogmatically to the report as accepted wisdom, even when the government had a different view.

In the report the senior officers concluded that the safety of Australia rested on two factors: the first was its membership of the British Empire, and the second was 'Australia's own ability to prevent an invading enemy from obtaining decisive victories pending the arrival of help from other parts of the Empire'.⁴ While it was obvious that Japan posed the greatest threat, the conference had to rely, to a large extent, on British intelligence.⁵ At this time Australia had no Department of Foreign Affairs, but during the Great War the Australian Director of Military Intelligence, Major EL Piesse, had concluded that Japan posed a greater threat than that suggested by the War Office. In 1919 Piesse became Director of the Pacific Branch of the Prime Minister's Department, with the task of studying developments in the Far East, particularly Japan. But for specific information about Japanese military capabilities Australia relied on British advice. Using this advice, the Australian senior officers assessed that Japan could, without difficulty, place in the field an army of 600,000 men. In peace the Japanese field army comprised 25 divisions, but in war it could expand to 42 divisions. Japan had sufficient mercantile shipping to transport an army of 100,000 fully-equipped men in one convoy. Like Jellicoe, the senior officers believed that Japan would strike when Britain was involved in Europe. With that threat assessment in mind, the senior officers concluded that while Australia might rely on the Royal Navy for protection, Australia would also need to 'maintain an Army capable of preventing an enemy from attaining a decision ashore'. The report continued:

Because of the extent of Australia's coast-line, the absence of sufficient railway facilities to move troops to meet requirements, and other certain disabilities, a considerable dispersion of troops is inevitable, *and it is essential that the Military Force, like the Naval Force, be the maximum obtainable.*

During the Great War Australia had maintained five infantry and almost two light horse divisions, so it was not surprising that the conference assessed that Australia could maintain a field force of two cavalry divisions and four infantry divisions, with the necessary army, corps and auxiliary troops making, upon war establishment, a total of about 180,000 all ranks. Before the war the Australian Army had had no formations larger than a brigade, but the experience of the war showed the necessity to train commanders and staffs at divisional and corps levels. The conference recommended that officers and NCOs from the AIF be used to staff the new militia formations and units.

The organisation proposed by the conference almost exactly paralleled that of the AIF in the last year of the war, and the report recommended that one cavalry division be organised in New South Wales and Queensland and the other in Victoria and South Australia. Since the area of strategic importance was southeast Australia, two infantry divisions were to be formed in New South Wales, supplemented from Queensland, and another two in Victoria, supplemented from South Australia. Three mixed brigades would be located in each of Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia, and these could form a fifth division if necessary.

The conference recognised that the need for coast defences and garrisons would be largely determined by naval considerations, which had yet to be discussed by the Committee of Imperial Defence in London. However, the conference accepted that the Army would probably

have to defend Sydney, Cockburn Sound in Western Australia, Newcastle, Melbourne and Hobart against attack by unarmoured surface vessels, submarines, aircraft and enemy landings. The coast defence equipment at Thursday Island, Townsville, Brisbane, Adelaide and Albany thus should be maintained until the views of the Committee of Imperial Defence were known.

The conference had based its proposals on the existing *Defence Act*, but it could not avoid commenting on it:

the advantages, moral and material, of fighting in the enemy's country are so enormous that it is folly to await the enemy's attack on our own soil, if there is any possibility of going to meet him and so of keeping him out of our own land ... The AIF had an opportunity to fight abroad and defend Australia so effectively that Australia hardly realized that it was defence and not offence, her troops had undertaken ... The community must, therefore, make up its mind, however unwillingly, that all preparations for the defence of Australia, thorough and complete as they may be, may break down absolutely if, at a final and decisive moment, the weapon of defence cannot be transferred beyond our territorial waters.

Faced with financial constraints, the government failed to approve any of the proposals for new equipment or for an arsenal to provide the necessary munitions. Nor did it take up the conference's implied request to change the *Defence Act*. Nonetheless, the government accepted the proposed structure and on 1 May 1921 the Army introduced its new divisional system by an administrative act. As the Inspector-General, Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel, put it, the divisional organisation marked 'the highest stage of development of the Forces'.⁶ Home training of the Citizen Forces, which had been suspended with broken periods since 1 November 1915, recommenced on 1 July 1921. The militia numbered 127,000 with a permanent cadre of 3500. Much of the first year was spent in the re-organisation of units under the divisional scheme and in the issuing of clothing and equipment. The government's response to the recommendations of the conference of senior officers was disappointing, but worse was to come.

Towards the end of 1921 representatives of Britain, France, Italy, the United States and Japan met for a disarmament conference in Washington where they agreed to reduce the numbers of their battleships and restrict the size of new vessels. Believing that Australia's security was now assured, in mid-1922 the government drastically reduced the defence vote from £8 million in 1921/22 to £5.2 million in 1923/24. Nearly half the ships of the Royal Australian Navy were decommissioned. In his Inspector-General's report for 1923 General Chauvel attributed the complacency with which the Australian people had accepted 'the denuding of their Defences' to a number of factors. These included geographical isolation and the fact that Australia had never been even threatened with invasion; a sublime faith in the power of the Royal Navy; an impression, for which the traditions established by the AIF in the war were responsible, that Australian men could be transformed into efficient soldiers in a few weeks; and the universal feeling that 'the war was a "war to end wars" and, as it was won, there is nothing further to fear'.⁷

The army was cut savagely. Although the seven militia divisions were retained, the overall strength of the militia was reduced to 31,000 men—only 25 per cent of its war establishment. Training was reduced to six days in camp and four days in local centres a year, and was confined to youths of 18 and 19 (that is, two annual quotas instead of the normal seven). The permanent army was reduced to 1600 while 72 permanent officers were retired. As AJ Hill has written: 'Thus the best hopes and the best advice of the Conference of Senior Officers were jettisoned. Economy was elevated to the prime aim and Defence lay defenceless before the political onslaught'.⁸ The senior officers had hoped to have an army that could repel a possible invader. All that was left was a skeleton force which, with ten days' training per year, could hardly be described as a real army.

It was soon obvious that the Washington Treaty was no guarantee of long term peace, and the Australian government thought that security might be provided by the naval base which the British government had recently decided to construct at Singapore. Under the so-called Singapore strategy, Britain undertook to send its main fleet to Singapore in time of threat from Japan. In turn, Australia accepted responsibility for the protection of maritime trade in the Australia Station, and agreed to contribute towards a naval force based at Singapore and to maintain a secondary base at Darwin. The Army was to have the capacity to expand to provide an expeditionary force as well as to defend the Australian continent.

The Singapore strategy was discussed at a meeting of the Council of Defence, chaired by the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce, in Melbourne on 30 August 1923. Generals White, Monash and Chauvel, who was now CGS as well as Inspector-General, all agreed with the views of the Chief of Naval Staff that 'if Singapore were made impregnable as a base for all types of ships including capital ships, Australia would be reasonably safe'.⁹ Next day, Chauvel wrote to Brigadier General Blamey, the Army representative in London who was to act as Bruce's military adviser at the forthcoming Imperial Conference, to prepare him for his task. He told Blamey that 'the Singapore Base, lying as it will on the flank of an enemy moving to attack Australia, will be of inestimable value to Australia and will in fact be the pivot of Australian defence'.¹⁰

From the Army's perspective, the key issue would be the defence of Singapore. Chauvel informed Blamey that plans had been prepared to send a force overseas if the government wished, but only so long as a separate force was raised. By this, Chauvel was referring to Plan 401 which had been prepared in 1922 when it looked as though Australia might be required to send an expeditionary force to Turkey during the so-called Chanak crisis.¹¹ (Plan 401 provided for different expeditionary forces ranging from an infantry or cavalry brigade group through to a complete division.). Chauvel continued that if the militia were mobilised, equipment would not be available for an overseas force. Anticipating that Blamey might 'be questioned as to the capacity of Australia to supply a portion of the Garrison for Singapore in time of war', Chauvel advised that this could be achieved by voluntary enlistment, if the government agreed, but added that the 'suitability of our troops for the purpose would further have to be considered'. The troops would be 'largely untrained and would require intensive training after arrival at Singapore'.¹² In view of Australia's efforts to reinforce Singapore in the Second World War and the fate of the untrained troops sent there in January 1942, these comments made in 1923 are of particular interest. The details of this policy were discussed by Bruce at the Imperial Conference in London later in 1923, and the resolutions of the conference became the basic principles of Australian defence policy and for cooperation with Britain on defence matters between the wars.

At this stage the Army had not determined how it was going to defend Australia. Indeed, the concept of militia divisions was relatively new, and the focus was primarily on the training of units rather than on preparing for higher level operations. Faced with financial restrictions, the best that the Army could do was concentrate on the training of commanders and staff, the purchase of essential equipment and the training of rank and file, in that order of priority.

Already the Army had doubts about the efficacy of the Singapore strategy. In 1924 the British government suspended construction of the naval base, and the Australian government responded by increasing expenditure on the Royal Australian Navy. The Australian Army's criticism of the Singapore strategy was put eloquently in an address to the United Service Institution of Victoria in 1926 by the Director of Mobilisation, Lieutenant Colonel HD Wynter. He argued that Australia had to establish a 'first class naval base' of its own; Australia should be self-reliant and not rely on imperial defence.¹³ In his annual reports during the 1920s the Inspector-General, Chauvel, also argued for the defence of Australia, pointing out that Japan would strike only when Britain was pre-occupied in Europe and thus would not be able to send a fleet to the Pacific. Chauvel insisted that there was a need to provide adequate protection for the major ports, but the government failed to provide the funds. For its part, the Navy claimed that the worst that could be expected was enemy raids rather than the invasion envisaged by the Army.

Eventually, in 1928 Chauvel persuaded the Defence Committee to prepare an appreciation of the threat to Australia under the conditions then existing; that is, without the Singapore base being completed. Australia still did not have its own capacity to gather intelligence and, as with the early studies, the Australian planners had to rely on British advice. Nonetheless, they tended to put greater emphasis on Japanese capabilities than their British counterparts. This appreciation, dated 9 August 1928, reaffirmed the view of the 1920 senior officers conference that Japan might make demands 'such, for example, as the abrogation of the "White Australia" policy ... when the British Empire is engaged in European complications'. The appreciation noted that Japan's traditional policy was 'to commence hostilities without warning and to attack the foundations of her opponent's sea power at the start'. After examining *Lloyd's Register* to determine Japan's merchant navy capacity, the appreciation concluded that Japan could embark and maintain a maximum of three divisions. The appreciation concluded further that in time of war there would be extensive raiding of trade routes. Furthermore, raids on important centres such as Darwin, Sydney, Newcastle and possibly Fremantle and Albany were 'to be expected and must be provided against'. An attack on Singapore, if the British Fleet was delayed, was a possibility but not until after Hong Kong had 'been effectively disposed of. An invasion of Australia, 'but only on a limited scale', was 'within the bounds of possibility and not so improbable as to allow of it being definitely ruled out'.¹⁴

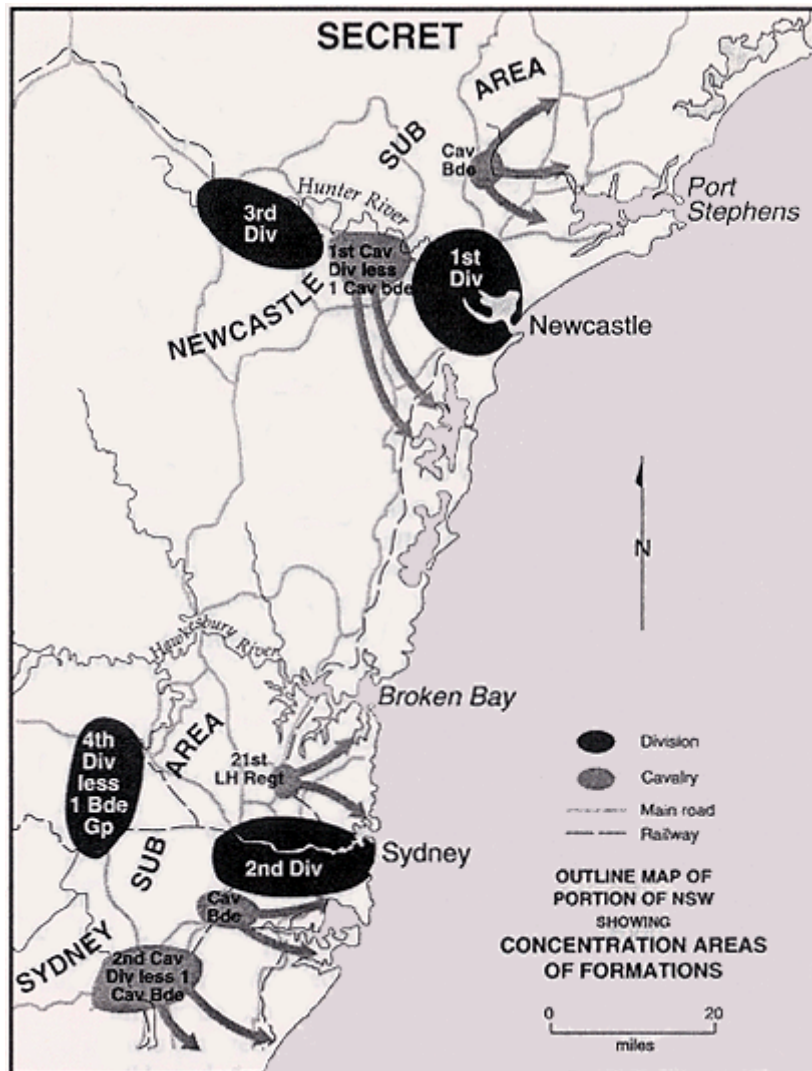
The Defence Committee endorsed this appreciation and the CGS, Chauvel, directed his small staff to begin preparing plans to deal with a possible Japanese landing. The officer responsible for these plans was the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, Colonel John Lavarack, who had attended the Imperial Defence College in 1928. He was an outstanding officer who was to be CGS in the late 1930s. In the Second World War he commanded both the 1st Australian Corps and the 1st Australian Army and ended his career as the Governor of Queensland.

Lavarack and his staff began work on two papers. The first was an examination of the Defence Committee's appreciation, which Lavarack thought did not give enough emphasis to the likelihood of a Japanese invasion. He wanted to make it quite clear that there was a case for the retention in Australia of mobile land forces'. However he acknowledged that it would be dangerous to suggest a review of the official appreciation since it did 'not finally exclude the possibility of invasion, and we could not be sure of a majority in any Committee appointed'.¹⁵ The Army's appreciation of the threat was progressively up-dated as the strategic situation deteriorated. For example, in 1932 the appreciation stated:

it is considered that recent events in Manchuria and Shanghai point to the fact that Japan is perfectly ready to take aggressive action in defiance of covenants and pacts ... Given a favourable opportunity, she would lose no chance of extending Southward her influence in the Western Pacific.¹⁶

The second paper prepared by Lavarack and his staff was the so-called 'Plan of Concentration', the first draft of which was circulated in September 1929. Not surprisingly, it was based on the contention that Japan would bide its time until Britain was involved in Europe.¹⁷ Japan might seek a rapid decision by landing at one of three locations that were vital to Australia; that is, Sydney, Newcastle or Melbourne. The probable strength of the invading force would be about three divisions, and it was thought that this force would receive substantial reinforcements in about two months from its initial landing. The Japanese would be 'fanatics who like dying in battle, whilst our troops would consist mainly of civilians hastily thrown together on mobilisation with very little training, short of artillery and possibly of gun ammunition'.¹⁸ The first aim of the Australian war plans was to defend the Sydney-Newcastle area which would be treated as one defended locality (see map below). Newcastle would be defended by the 1st Corps, which would consist of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 1st and 4th Infantry Divisions. Sydney would be defended by the 2nd Corps, comprising the 2nd Cavalry Division and the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions. Local forces would be required to defend Melbourne, Fremantle, Brisbane, Darwin, Hobart and Adelaide. Victoria would be the principal source of supply and maintenance, with the main base at Albury. Reconnaissances and studies were carried out secretly by permanent staff officers to see whether the concentration areas could support the formations to be deployed there.¹⁹

**OUTLINE MAP OF PORTION OF NSW
SHOWING CONCENTRATION AREAS OF FORMATION**



This map was attached to the Army's inter-war concentration plan and shows the divisional and brigade concentration areas in the Sydney and Newcastle areas. It has been slightly re-drawn as the original showed the cavalry formation areas in green and the infantry areas in red. The original map is in AWM 54, item 243/6/6.

The secrecy surrounding the plan of concentration was illustrated by the opening comments made by the new Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, Lieutenant Colonel Vernon Sturdee, when he described it to the senior officers' course in 1933. He began:

I desire to impress on each and every one of you the necessity for absolute secrecy regarding what I am about to say concerning the Plan of Concentration. As the exercise is based on that plan it is essential that its contents be treated in a similar manner. Any leakage of information about the exercise which might reach the press may be sufficient to produce the most wonderful scare headlines such as 'Military chiefs consider invasion imminent. Staff are now concentrated in Sydney to make full preparations to repel Japanese attack before Christmas'. Just imagine the political and diplomatic repercussions—so please watch your step.²⁰

This plan continued in existence throughout the 1930s, was the basis of several senior officers' exercises, and was the reason for the 1st Infantry Division's exercise in the Port Stephens area, north of Newcastle, in October 1938. There were, of course, many weaknesses in this plan. There was no guarantee that the Japanese would land in the Sydney-Newcastle area. No corps headquarters were formed and until 1938 the divisions had had no opportunity to exercise as formations. Indeed without the necessary resources the plans were quite unrealistic.

The plan of concentration was considered by the Army to be the second stage of a three-stage planning process, even though it was the first element to be completed. The first stage was to be the preparation of mobilisation plans and the third was to be the preparation of a plan of operation.²¹ Towards the end of the 1930s the mobilisation plan was subsumed in work on the Commonwealth War Book, which set out the actions to be taken by various government agencies on the outbreak of war, and was detailed in the more specific Army War Book.

In 1929, when the first plan of concentration was prepared, all this was in the future. Towards the end of that year the change of government and the onset of the Depression made it even more unlikely that the resources necessary to support such a plan would be provided for many years. Immediately, without consulting the Department of Defence, the new Labor Government suspended compulsory service and soon after introduced a voluntary scheme. Within a few months the economic situation had deteriorated, and in 1930 the government undertook more drastic cuts. The defence vote was reduced, ships were paid off and Army officers and men were required to take up to eight weeks' annual leave without pay. By 1932 the Citizen Forces were down to 28,000 volunteers, from 47,000 (of whom 7000 had been volunteers) in the late 1920s, and the permanent army numbered 1536.

These pressures heightened the arguments between the services as each sought to maintain its share of the defence vote. The Army's case, that preparations had to be made to forestall a possible invasion, was argued strongly by Colonel Lavarack, supported by the CGS, Chauvel. The Navy was capable of arguing its own case, but it was supported by the new secretary of the Defence Committee, FG Shedden. Like Lavarack, Shedden had attended the Imperial Defence College in 1928, but had stayed in London for most of 1929. There Shedden had written a paper arguing that Australia's defence was best assured within the framework of imperial defence. When this paper was circulated in Australia it was keenly criticised in an Army report prepared by Lavarack. The report stated:

Mr Shedden has taken an immense deal of trouble and is to be congratulated on his work which is ably compiled. I am afraid, however, that nothing new is disclosed. The facts arrayed and the conclusions arrived at, which are all based upon undisputed command of all the seas, have been put forward time and again but have never been accepted by Australia.

Paragraph by paragraph Lavarack pulled Shedden's arguments to pieces, and concluded that there was no substitute for a trained army.²²

With his own reputation at stake, Shedden replied by questioning Lavarack's knowledge of naval matters and then homed in on the 'raids versus invasion' issue;

No one said that Australia was immune from attacks on territory. The whole question is 'Invasion'. The writer [Lavarack] does not appear to understand the difference - between Raids and Invasion.²³

Lavarack had made an enemy of Shedden, who by 1937 was Secretary of the Department of Defence, and this was to have unfortunate consequences. Writing in the 1960s, Shedden claimed that during the Second World War Chauvel told him that, 'having seen the course of the war, he now knew that the Naval view that the security of Australia ultimately depended

on the command of sea communications, had been correct, but it had been necessary for the Army to maintain "the bogey of invasion and seven divisions for local defence", in order to resist any attempt by the Government to reduce the Army organization and its Vote.²⁴

In 1931 the new United Australia Party government came to power led by Joseph Lyons, and the following year confirmed that its policy was that it would be better to provide efficient protection against raids rather than inefficient measures against invasion'.²⁵ The new CGS, Major General Julius Bruce, would not let the matter rest and continued to question the policy. For a while in mid-1934 it looked as though Bruce was making headway against the Minister for Defence, Sir George Pearce, when he received a favourable response to a well-argued letter. Bruce had written:

As you are no doubt aware our plans for mobilization and concentration, and in fact all our plans, which have taken years of preparation to reach their present state of completion, are based on defence against invasion, and I feel that this work should not be scrapped but should be proceeded with as a measure of precaution in case the international situation should deteriorate.²⁶

However, towards the end of 1934 the Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Sir Maurice Hankey, visited Australia and persuaded the government that it should continue to rely on the Singapore strategy. In April 1935 Lavarack was appointed CCS and he continued the argument with the government. Hankey thought that Lavarack was 'a bit of an invasionist', although not as bad as Wynter.²⁷ Lavarack wrote that his motto was 'Trust in the Navy but keep your powder dry'. He added that the problem was that the RAN did not think 'it necessary to have any powder of their own, much less keep it dry'.²⁸

The 1933/34 budget showed a slight increase in the defence vote and thereafter it increased each year; in 1932-33 it had been a little over £3 million, in 1933-34 it was a little over £4 million and by 1935-36 it was £7 million. But initially this increase had little effect other than to revive an almost moribund force. As usual, the majority of the money went to the Navy. For example, the sum allocated to the Army in 1935-6 was £1.8 million; but at least some new equipment such as heavy guns, anti-aircraft guns and vehicles could be purchased.

In overseeing this re-armament Lavarack's priorities were: firstly, to train commanders and staff; secondly, to purchase equipment; and thirdly, to begin training the militia. These were similar priorities to those determined in 1924. Lavarack and the Military Board wanted to build up the field army, but the Minister for Defence, advised by the Navy, was adamant that priority had to be given to coast defences. Lavarack pointed out that anti-aircraft defences and mobile land forces would be needed to prevent raids on the guns, but the Minister's view prevailed.

On 25 September 1933 the Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, announced a major programme to install two 9.2-inch guns at each of North Head (Sydney), Cape Banks (entrance to Botany Bay, Sydney) and Rottnest Island (off Fremantle), and 6-inch gun batteries at Cowan Cowan (Brisbane), Rottnest, South Head (Sydney) and Henry Head (entrance to Botany Bay, Sydney).²⁹

The Government's programme was the result of months of discussion in the Defence Committee in which the CGS, General Bruce, had proposed a more ambitious three-year programme for the purchase of new equipment.³⁰ His proposals were not supported by the Navy, which relied on the view of the Committee of Imperial Defence that the Japanese would not attempt an invasion of Australia.³¹ With the threat of Singapore in their rear the Japanese would not send their battleships or aircraft carriers south to Australia, and they would only attack with cruisers, armed merchant vessels, submarines and aircraft carried on these vessels. So it was decided to install only 9.2-inch guns, rather than larger calibre guns.

Fortunately, unlike Britain, in the early 1930s Australia did not appear to face the prospect of large-scale raids from land-based aircraft, nor was it expected that there would be organised attacks from carrier-borne aircraft. However, if the 9.2-inch guns deterred an enemy from

attacking with gun-fire, then the enemy might be forced to use aircraft located on cruisers or raiders.³² It was not long before this idea had to be reviewed for, with the rapid expansion of the Japanese Naval Air Force, the chances that the Japanese might use carrier-borne aircraft increased, and it became more urgent to provide adequate air defences at each major port.

However important these developments might have been, Lavarack was still convinced that Australia needed to prepare the field force so that it could deal with an invasion, and before long the government was accusing Lavarack of disloyalty. The Director of Military Training, Colonel Wynter, who had written about the weakness of the Singapore strategy in the 1920s, continued the argument with an address to the United Service Institution in 1935. The Opposition used the article to criticise the Government's defence policy. On several occasions the Minister for Defence, Sir Archdale Parkhill, accused the Military Board of leaking information to the press, and Parkhill criticised Lavarack for permitting Wynter to address the United Service Institution. Wynter lost his temporary rank of colonel and was sent to a less important posting. Encouraged by Shedden, Parkhill withdrew his recommendation for Lavarack to be awarded a CB.³³

The last years of peace were marked by a steadily accelerating defence vote. However, in the Army much of this additional money was absorbed by coast defences. Initially there was little effect on the field army, which increased its size only marginally; by July 1936 the Citizen Forces had an authorised strength of 36,000 (it was actually 26,637). It was not until 20 October 1938, following the Munich crisis, that the Minister for Defence announced additional measures. The militia was permitted to expand to a strength of 70,000. The permanent forces were to be ready at two hours' notice to man fixed and anti-aircraft defences, and were also to expand in numbers. The Army budget was increased from £11.6 to £19.7 million and the acquisition of arms, ammunition and war equipment was accelerated.³⁴

In early 1938 Shedden, who had become Secretary of the Department of Defence the previous November, persuaded the government that the only solution to resolving the problems concerning the Army was to appoint a British officer as Inspector-General. As a result, in June 1938 Lieutenant General EK Squires took up the appointment as Inspector-General and submitted his first, and only, report in December 1938. Like Lavarack, Squires recommended that the Army be organised in peacetime so that once it was mobilised it could deal not only with raids but with an invasion, although he was less direct in his language than Lavarack had been. Squires wrote:

[The Army] must be able first, to defend certain vital and vulnerable areas and localities against attacks on a relatively small scale, which may take place, with little or no warning, immediately on the outbreak of war or even in anticipation of a formal declaration of war.

Secondly, they must be able to expand, after their initial mobilisation, into an army strong enough to resist aggression or any larger scale likely to be developed against Australia.³⁵

Squires acknowledged that the government's policy was defence against raids and recalled that for some years the government had fixed the strength of the militia at 35,000 men. This was considered necessary to enable the Army to mobilise its First Line Component; that is, two divisions, three cavalry brigades, four mixed brigades and the necessary fortress and ancillary troops. However, Squires then added a twist to the story:

By their recent decision to increase the Militia the Government have demonstrated their acceptance of their military advisers' view that a peace strength of 35,000 was an inadequate nucleus for expansion, first, into an effective First Line Component, and, secondly—perhaps after a short interval only—into a considerably larger force.

In other words, there was a tacit acceptance by the government that the Army was preparing to resist an invasion, even if it formally rejected this notion.

Squires' two main proposals impacted on the Army's strategic planning. The first was a proposal to raise two regular brigades with a peace establishment of some 7500 men. These troops would assist the militia with training, would afford the officers of the Staff Corps much needed command experience, and on the outbreak of war would be available for such necessary tasks as the protection of vital points. This force would require an amendment to the *Defence Act*, and the only part of the force actually raised was the Darwin Mobile Force of some 245 men, all wearing gunner badges to meet the requirements of the unamended *Defence Act*. Squires' second proposal concerned the overall army organisation. At that time the six military districts, six militia divisions and various independent brigades were all commanded directly from Army Headquarters in Melbourne.

Squires proposed to reorganise the Army into four commands based in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, with an independent garrison in Darwin. The commands, named Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western, would be responsible for all units in their areas, with the exception of some training establishments. Southern Command would include South Australia and Tasmania. This structure was not implemented until October 1939, one month after the outbreak of war.³⁶

However, as early as the Munich crisis in September 1938 Squires had discussed his proposal with Lavarack in the light of the Army's concentration plan. It will be recalled that when threatened by invasion the Army planned to deploy a corps to Newcastle and another to Sydney, but there were no corps headquarters in existence. The new command arrangements would mean that the GOC Eastern Command would, in effect, become a corps commander responsible for the defence of New South Wales. On 28 September 1938 Lavarack and Squires jointly recommended to the government that in the event of mobilisation of the 'first line component', Major General Sir Thomas Blamey, a militia officer on the unattached list, should be given command of the New South Wales District. Major General Sir Carl Jess, the Adjutant-General, would command the Victorian District, and Major General Henry Gordon Bennett, the most senior militia officer, also on the unattached list, would command the Newcastle Fortress area. Squires and Lavarack also suggested that either of themselves could be appointed commander-in-chief of the army to direct the defence of Australia.³⁷ The Cabinet hesitated to act, the Munich crisis passed, and the proposals were not implemented. Nonetheless, the incident gives some idea of army thinking at the time.

The official policy that the Army had to be prepared to deal with raids rather than an invasion persisted until the outbreak of war. In February 1939 the Committee of Imperial Defence in London admitted that the fleet it might send to oppose the Japanese Navy in the Far East could be inferior to it, raising further questions as to the likelihood of an attack on Australia. In the face of the deteriorating strategic situation, in May 1939 the Chiefs of Staff agreed that while preparations to meet an invasion need not be pursued, Australia should prepare to meet a medium scale of attack, that is major landings, rather than only the minor scale of attack, that is minor landings. However, the Chiefs could not maintain their unanimous approach at the Council of Defence in July, and the old planning base remained.

On the outbreak of war the first elements of the Army's strategic plans, as set out in the Army War Book, were implemented immediately. The permanent gunners manned the fortresses and were soon relieved by the militia fortress artillery. The government reintroduced universal training to ensure that the militia was maintained at a strength of not less than 75,000. Meanwhile the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was raised using the old Plan 401 for an expeditionary force. Since the permanent force envisaged by Squires had not been formed, the Army was desperately short of the trained and experienced personnel that were necessary both to train the militia and the AIF.

In retrospect, it is easy to criticise the Army's strategic planning between the wars, but in many ways it faced an insoluble problem. As mentioned earlier, the Army was hamstrung by the *Defence Act*, which restricted the recruitment of permanent forces. With a small population and a limited economy, Australia would have been hard-pressed to build credible defence forces even if times had been good; but economically it was the worst of times. There were severe weaknesses in both the Singapore strategy and also in the alternative strategy of

building a large army to resist invasion. Perhaps the Army could have seized on possibilities offered by the Singapore strategy to argue that such a strategy required a smaller, capable, hard-hitting field force. But there was no guarantee that funds would have been found to provide such a field force. Within the framework of the policy of relying on Singapore and protecting Australia from raids, money was spent on installing guns at the main ports. There was some justification for these installations, but the money would have been better spent on building a balanced field force with modern field and anti-tank guns, armoured vehicles, including tanks, soft-skinned vehicles and communications. Against his wishes, Lavarack was directed by the government to spend the Army's funds on coastal defence, rather than on the field force.

The most remarkable aspect of the Army's strategic planning between the wars was its consistency. Despite the government's policy of preparing to deal with raids, from 1920 onwards the Army prepared to counter an invasion. By the late 1920s this strategy was being turned into an operational concept which in turn dominated the development of the Army in the 1930s. The arguments in the Defence Committee and in the Council of Defence about raids versus invasion were extremely important when it came to the allocation of funds. But when it came to planning, the Army still worked on the basis of defeating an invasion.

The Army's experience between the war's also focuses attention on the strategic decision-making process. There was rarely any agreement or cooperation between the Navy and Army, and generally the RAAF was more concerned with ensuring its own survival as a separate force. There was no joint service organisation, and until the mid-1930s little guidance was provided by the civilian staff in the Department of Defence. Faced with conflicting advice, the Australian Government looked to Britain for direction. There were few avenues by which the public could be exposed to the various arguments. Lavarack might have been better off pursuing a cooperative rather than confrontational approach. But with the forces arrayed against him perhaps he would have achieved no more than he did.

Of course not all Army officers embraced the invasion theory with the same dedication as Lavarack and his senior staff. One exception was Major General Sir Thomas Blamey, who as an unallotted militia officer attended meetings of the Council of Defence in the late 1930s. For example, on 17 December 1937 the Council considered the questions raised by the Australian delegation at the recent Imperial Conference in London, particularly Australia's acceptance of the view that its defence rested on Britain's intention to send a fleet to Singapore in time of threat. This plan was supported by the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin, but both the CGS, Lavarack, and the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice Marshal R Williams, were concerned to build up the defences in Australia. Blamey 'expressed his gratification with the very clear and definite statement which had been presented'. He thought that 'the Australian authorities responsible for the preparation of the defence scheme were to be congratulated on the efficacy of their plans ... The whole fabric of the scheme on which the statement was based appeared to hinge around Singapore, and so long as Singapore could hold out' many of the difficulties could be overcome. However, the Minister for External Affairs, WM Hughes, the former Prime Minister who had for many years warned against the Japanese threat, 'raised the question of the impregnability of Singapore. He asked whether anyone could show that Singapore was impregnable or could be made so. If it proved to be vulnerable, and we were relying on Singapore to keep the enemy at a distance, we were certainly living in a fool's paradise'. Colvin assured him that 'the Empire Defence Scheme as prepared by the British Naval Authorities was based on the undoubted impregnability of Singapore, and that the British strategy was based on the fact that Singapore can hold out during the 70 days period, while awaiting the co-operation of the British Fleet'.³⁸

Similar arguments surfaced at the Council meeting on 24 February 1938, and an interesting aspect of the meeting was Blamey's views on the likelihood of invasion.³⁹ According to the minutes of the meeting, Blamey:

felt that it was reasonable for the Council to assume that invasion was unlikely and he felt that our efforts should be directed towards the provision of adequate defence against raids on a scale outlined in the Agenda.

Lavarack replied that Japan was ready to take risks to undertake an invasion, but Blamey agreed with Admiral Colvin that Japan would have to deal with Singapore first. However, he did add that if Japan were at war with Australia, then Australia 'could not dream of sending men abroad unless the Japanese Fleet with its menace to Australia were first dealt with and overcome'.⁴⁰

It is not known what Shedden thought of Blamey's views, but he certainly would have found them more acceptable than those of Lavarack. However, at the next meeting on 18 March Lavarack put aside his reservations about preparing just to defend against raids, and stated that 'even with the present low scale of efficiency of the Militia Forces, it should be sufficient to meet the scale of attack for defence against raids on the minimum scale'. Blamey retorted that in his view the militia 'in its present state of efficiency would be of little use against a raid of any size'. Lavarack quickly explained that 'the raid contemplated consisted of 200 men, and on that scale the force we have should be in sufficient numbers'. While that might have been correct, Blamey still thought that 'the militia Forces as at present constituted were practically useless as an army'.⁴¹

During these years Blamey delivered a series of broadcasts on international affairs. In a special broadcast on the services on 9 November 1938 he explained that Australia's vital area was in the triangle formed by Newcastle, Wollongong and Canberra, with Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Darwin also being important. The first line of defence lay with the Navy:

While there is a battle fleet at sea based upon Singapore, and until it has been signally defeated in naval battle a large scale invasion of Australia would be so hazardous as to be unlikely to be attempted. But it would be very unwise to assume that no conditions can arrive in which the battle fleet available, whatever it may be, cannot possibly be defeated. So no nation can take the risk of remaining unprepared to meet invasion. Our defence requires therefore that adequate military forces be available on land to meet any possible invasion. No Army can be made in a day or even in a year.⁴²

So in his public statements Blamey was careful not to enter too deeply into the argument between the Navy and the Army, but by late 1938 action was well underway to expand the militia.

As war approached, Blamey's views about the possibility of invasion were not so dogmatic as Lavarack's, even though he expressed deep concern about the Army's readiness for war. It was not surprising, then, that the influential Shedden did all that he could to side-line Lavarack and to ensure that Blamey rather than Lavarack received command of the AIF when it was formed in October 1939.

It was a salutary reminder that strategic planning is ultimately a political issue. In the inter-war period the Army had failed to persuade its political masters to adopt what it perceived to be the correct strategy. In trying to pursue that strategy without political endorsement the Army's leaders paid a considerable price. No doubt they still felt it was a price worth paying.

Endnotes

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23. Annotations on *ibid*.
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25. Quoted in Claude Neumann, 'Australia's Citizen Soldiers, 1919-1939: A Study of Organization, Command, Recruiting, Training and Equipment' (MA Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1978), 48.
26. Bruce to Pearce, 17 July 1934, CRS A5954, box 840.
27. Hankey to Dill, 30 November 1934, CAB 63/70, Public Record Office, London.
28. Lavarack to Lt Gen Sir John Dill, 9 June 1936, Lavarack Papers, in the possession of Dr JO Lavarack.
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30. CGS to Secretary, Defence Committee, 30 November 1933, CRS A2031, item vol 2.
31. Defence Committee Agenda No 7/1934, 2 March 1934, CRS A2302, item 1934.
32. Secretary, Department of Defence to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 30 July 1936, CRS A1608, item B15/1/9.
33. Shedden to Shepherd, 18 January 1937, CRS A5954, box 886.
34. Acceleration of Defence Programme', CRS A5954, item 789/1.
35. Squires report, AWM 54, item 243/6/58.
36. The idea of using the term 'Commands' came from Lavarack, not Squires. See Lavarack's comments on the report in AWM 54, item 243/6/58.
37. Shedden to Minister for Defence, 28, 29 September 1939, CRS A5954, item 890/3.
38. Summary of Proceedings of Council of Defence Meeting, 17th December 1937, CRS A5954, item 762/4.
39. Summary of Proceedings of Council of Defence Meeting, 24th February 1938, CRS A5954, item 762/5.
40. *Ibid*.
41. Summary of Proceedings of Council of Defence Meeting, 18th March 1938, CRS A5954, item 762/6.
42. The script is in AWM, PF 85/355, item 8.