

AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF Lieutenant-General John Grey

General O'Donnell, Mr Gullett, General Officers, Director, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the inaugural Army history conference. As it is a start-point for us in terms of history conferences, you'll recognise that I hope that it does go well and that we achieve all the things that I'd like to see come out of it.

I believe that a nation that neither recognises nor has regard for its history runs the risk of relearning it; in looking forward it is vital that we remember where we have been. Bearing in mind that there are two Landing Craft Tanks that have recently come into the inventory, then I think it is very important we look at this particular topic.

I had a number of reasons for conducting an army history conference. These included a desire to demonstrate the Australian Army's commitment to the preservation, interpretation and promulgation of its history. This is a big task and one to which the Army has a substantial commitment. Through the Army History Research Grants and Publishing Scheme, Army will provide approximately \$50,000 in direct grants to various history researchers this year, and an additional \$50,000 will be used to publish the results of previous research work. Additionally, the Army Doctrine Centre has been very successful in producing its Heritage series of videos on Hamel, Kokoda and Maryang San, and is currently working on a video of the Australian Light Horse in the First World War. Their military history program has also produced some excellent books, *Gona's Gone!* being the latest, with *Largely a Gamble: Australians in Syria June – July 1941*, and the battles of Tobruk and Crete to follow.

Another reason for holding this conference, and one that is linked to the first, is my commitment to the continuing education of Army's officers. Fundamentally, the study of military history provides an officer with some perspective of the profession of arms, instils in them the values and ethos of their service, inspires loyalty and reinforces existing traditions. It also helps young officers develop and place in context professional concepts, and permits them to view current problems and issues in their proper perspective.

So why select the subject of today's conference, Australian Army Amphibious Operations in WWII. I initially chose this subject as I felt that it would provide scope for an examination of land operations in both a joint and combined operational setting. However, as I considered the subject I realised its worth as a subject in its own right.

Amphibious warfare fills an ambiguous place in Australian military history and in current Australian military doctrine. On the one hand Australia does not have a strong tradition in amphibious warfare, but on the other hand Australia has had considerable experience in amphibious operations. This disconnect between lack of tradition and our considerable experience needs some explanation. The Australian Army was formed not to fight overseas, but for the defence of the homeland. It was built around a compulsorily enlisted, part-time militia which would fight around the main population centres. For that reason, the new Australian Army did not expect that it would be involved in amphibious warfare.

It was ironic, then, that Australia's contribution to the First World War began with two amphibious operations. The first, the landing of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force on New Britain, near Rabaul, in September 1914, was a classic example of the exercise of maritime power. The Australian land forces were quite small, consisting of a battalion of infantry specially enlisted in Sydney and another small battalion of naval reservists and ex-seamen. While it is true that the expedition was ordered by Britain against the wishes of the Australian Chief of Naval Staff, nonetheless, it constituted the first expedition planned and executed by the Australian forces. It was not seen as a precedent for the future.

The second amphibious operation, the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, is far better known than the landing on New Britain. Yet when the First AIF was dispatched overseas in October 1914, there was no expectation that it would be involved in amphibious operations. After the war, the AIF was dissolved and the land defence of Australia was again put in the hands of the part-time militia. Since the militia could not serve overseas, there was no requirement for, or training in, amphibious operations.

The Australian Army's commitment in the Second World War was similar to the first. Again, we raised a special force, the Second AIF, for service with British forces in France. Again, it was diverted to operations in the Middle East. It was not involved in Gallipoli-type amphibious operations, but in 1941, it was transported by ship to Greece and evacuated under trying circumstances from Greece and Crete by the Royal Navy.

In the defence of Australia in 1941 and 1942, the Australian Army deployed formations and units to forward locations such as Timor, Ambon, New Ireland and New Britain, but did not have the maritime and air resources to back them up. It was not until the Americans arrived that a proper maritime strategy for the defence of Australia and the subsequent counter-offensive could be contemplated.

The senior Australian commanders quickly understood the maritime nature of the war in the Pacific, but since the Americans provided the bulk of the naval and air forces, inevitably they took the running. Our speakers for the rest of today will discuss the Australian amphibious operations in considerable detail so I will not do so now. However, I would like to comment on a few aspects concerning Australian operations in the South-West Pacific which might not be covered. The first concerns the minor amphibious operations carried out by the Australian 6th Division near Wewak and the Second Australian Corps on Bougainville. These operations differed from the other operations such as at Finschhafen, Tarakan and Balikpapan, in that they were conducted by relatively small formations or units in shore-to-shore operations that were designed to support land operations along the coast. In other words, the amphibious operations became part of the scheme of manoeuvre of the land commander. Because these operations were much smaller in scope than the major landings, they could be conducted and supported by mainly Australian naval and air units.

The second point to note is that the more frequently amphibious operations are conducted the more smoothly and quickly they can be mounted. However, over confidence must be avoided. In today's discussion of the successful amphibious operations we should not forget that one Australian operation came close to disaster. This was the landing of a reinforced company of the 31st/51st Infantry Battalion at Porton Plantation in northern Bougainville in May 1945. The Japanese surrounded the beachhead, and the following evening three bullet-proof landing craft beached under intense fire to take off the survivors, one of the landing craft becoming stuck on a coral reef. Two days later sixty men, including wounded, were rescued. Had the Japanese been in greater force it could have been a complete disaster.

To complete the picture of the Australian experience of amphibious operations, we should briefly consider the post-war period. Although a small regular army was formed, the main defence of Australia was to be carried out by the CMF, which in time of war would be expanded and deployed to the Middle East. That did not eventuate and instead we again found ourselves deploying troops - this time from the regular army - overseas to join with our Allies in essentially continental type commitments - Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam.

I am sure that today's discussion will bring out a wide range of lessons touching on many aspects, from the strategic through the operational to the tactical, and perhaps even the technical. And it is important that it does so; the lessons of the past are vitally important to the development of doctrine for the present. However, it seems to me that there are at least three broad reasons why a study of the Australian Army's experience of amphibious operations in the Second World War has relevance for today.

The first reason is that by their very nature amphibious operations are joint. The more we practise and develop doctrine and experience in amphibious operations the better we will be at joint warfare. Expertise at joint warfare, from the strategic right down to the tactical levels, is one area in which we in the Australian Defence Force can develop a real force multiplier, but we still have much work to do in this area.

The second reason is in the area of the operational art. In the Australian Army we have gained an excellent reputation for fighting at the tactical level. The ADF has been gaining expertise at the strategic level. But the ADF has no real experience in the planning and conduct of campaigns, although they are studied by our senior officers at the operational level. Potential campaign commanders have to learn how to use all the resources available to them - not just the resources of their own service. A senior officer conducting a land-oriented campaign has to be fully attuned to all the possibilities of using the air and naval resources placed at their disposal. They cannot afford to overlook the possibility of manoeuvring land forces from the sea. Even the Americans, with their vast experience of amphibious warfare, are now emphasising this approach in the planning and conduct of operations. If ever we have to fight in Australia, it is almost inevitable that the fighting will be near the coast, and land commanders must be ready to manoeuvre from the sea.

And finally, we must never overlook the importance of land forces even in supporting a maritime strategy. As MacArthur found in the South-West Pacific, it was necessary to have considerable land forces to support his maritime strategy. Seizing and protecting forward bases can require many men and considerable firepower.

One of the curious things about the geography of northern Australia is that the vital areas are much like islands, with the sea on one side and a stretch of desert or formidable terrain on the other. To defend this area properly, our land forces need the sorts of characteristics needed for maritime warfare; that is, they must be able to be deployed rapidly in small compact groups. They need sufficient firepower to deal with the enemy when they arrive, they need to be able to survive at the end of a tenuous logistic link, and they have to have sufficient tactical mobility to operate once they arrive in their new locations.

Amphibious operations are some of the most challenging that a military commander ever has to plan and conduct. I believe that there is much to learn from the Australian experience of these operations in the Second World War, and I look forward to the remainder of today's discussion.

I have pleasure in declaring this Military History Conference open.

Thank you.