

A SELF RELIANT DEFENCE FORCE

Paul Dibb (The Dibb Report June 1986) emphasised that as far as is possible, we should ensure that Australia's equipment purchases are 'Force Multipliers' by which he meant that as far as possible, defence equipment should serve, in addition to its primary purpose, to support other areas of defence and so maximise its utility. We are presently on the brink of acquiring a number of equipment items that could form the basis of the best 'force multiplier' that the ADF has ever possessed, but sadly it would appear that government is unlikely to see the need to properly equip two of the platforms presently in the pipeline.

The acquisitions referred to are three Air Warfare Destroyers, two support ships (LHDs) and the F18 replacement, the multirole F35. The first two items have been committed, with contracts under way, and some measure of commitment has also been made to the acquisition of the F35. These acquisitions, together with other platforms currently operational, could form the sort of flexible defence asset, the like of which we have not before enjoyed, a compact force employing the talents of all three services. All that needs to be done is to procure the appropriate mix of the F35 and to develop the LHDs to their full potential.

The LHDs are designed to have a multi role capability, similar to the Royal Navy's 'Ocean' which operates aircraft of all three services. They will require and deserve the maximum support that can be provided in carrying out those roles. If one requirement involves the carriage of troops and their equipment in a forward defensive environment, then the availability of integral fixed wing aircraft for which these ships were designed, would not only provide support en route, but would support troops ashore where the aircraft could be operated in terrain where conventional, land based aircraft could not be used.

However with the anti 'aircraft carrier' mentality which has pervaded Australian governments since the loss of the proposed 'Australia' (Invincible) in the early 80s, it is intended to strip the LHDs of any equipment that might support fixed wing aircraft operations. The one exception is the 'ski jump', not for any philosophical or strategic reason, but simply because its removal would increase costs.

The F35 is to be a multi role aircraft, using a common (basically) airframe for each of its roles and one of the options to be produced is a Short Take Off Vertical Landing (STOVL) version, the F35B. It is the acquisition of just one squadron of these by the RAAF, that would see the creation of a maritime group, comprising elements of all three armed services and providing a range of defence options that Australia has long required, thus enabling the Defence Force to carry out forward defence operations, a need that both major political parties now appear to embrace. Such a force would also be valuable in combined operations when working with the U.S or other allied navies which operate STOVL aircraft, providing landing platforms for their aircraft; commonality would have obvious and significant operational and logistic advantages.

The RAAF has long been tasked with the support of naval groups distant from our shores and for so long, it has been realised that such support is not a practical proposition with conventional land based aircraft. The acquisition of a squadron of F35Bs would at last enable the air force to fulfil the role with which it has long been charged.

The F35B is to be the U.S Marine's future STOVL aircraft, replacing the AV8B which has enabled the marines to provide invaluable support to their troops ashore. Additionally it is to be adopted by the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy, Italy and possibly Spain, given that they already have the appropriate platform. That platform is the hull that Spain will be producing for Australia's LHDs.

Army Support. We will shortly have two LHD platforms that will carry troops to counter threats in our area, in all probability in locations without the luxury of fully equipped, stored or defended airfields and whilst they will have helicopter support, any high speed fixed wing cover that they may desperately need, will have to be provided by land based aircraft, distant from the scene of action. The likelihood of that support being provided within acceptable response times will in many circumstances be somewhat remote. The very significant advantage of having that support operating in the first instance from its fully equipped base at sea and thereafter being available from hastily prepared airstrips adjacent to the scene of operations, would be incalculable.

It is reasonable to assume that troops without the support of fixed wing integral air cover will be placed at unacceptable risk, as will the naval units which support them

Short Take Off, Vertical Landing (STOVL) aircraft have been proved in numerous conflicts since the Harrier commenced service with the Royal Air Force in 1969. The aircraft was first used in combat in 1982 during the Falklands war, a conflict which would not have been successfully pursued by the U.K without the use of Stovl aircraft. Since then the 'Harrier' and the later version, the 'AV8B' have proved themselves in 'Desert Storm', Kosovo and by the U.S Marines in support of troops ashore. Four months after a formal request was made for an upgraded Harrier equipped to suit the particular operational requirements in Afghanistan, the aircraft was delivered and "has consistently performed brilliantly in defending Coalition Forces."

Objections have been raised in various quarters to the proposal to acquire a fixed wing integral air capability and it would be worthwhile identifying some of these and challenging them.

***Navy will be fully committed in handling all the equipment currently owned and in the pipeline, given the constraints of personnel available.**

The proposal does not consider an increase in equipment for Navy. Air Force would bring its aircraft, spares, maintenance equipment and personnel aboard Navy platforms and if one has to consider detail, Air Force could contribute to victualling and any other incidental costs for which it would be responsible should the aircraft be in service elsewhere

***The acquisition of other types of equipment will dilute the overall capability of the ADF.**

The proposal suggests the exchange, within the F35 group, of one type of aircraft for another, resulting in the same number overall, but having a greater, more flexible capability. It is understood that the F35B may be more expensive than the conventional version, but it is believed that the increased value to all three services, will more than justify such cost.

***The need to escort 'aircraft carriers' would tie up forces that may be required elsewhere.**

This comment scarcely deserves a response, since it would appear to imply that the LHDs, without fixed wing aircraft aboard and possibly carrying troops, tanks etc. would not be escorted.

***We can no longer afford an 'aircraft carrier'.**

We are in fact buying two aircraft carriers and stripping them of the facilities that would enable them to fulfil their designed role.

***The proposed Air Warfare Destroyers will afford the anti air protection needed by the fleet.**

There is no doubt that the 3 proposed AWDs will significantly enhance fleet protection and there is equally no doubt that they will not provide the ability to carry a manned platform with its weapons systems, at speed, over the horizon, to deal with an opposing force in a manner that remotely guided missiles cannot. We are not yet at a point in our defence technology where remotely guided systems are more effective than human control in all circumstances.

Perhaps even more importantly given the likely role of the LHDs, they (the AWDs) cannot be expected to provide the sort of support needed by troops whilst landing in hostile territory and the protective cover required when they are ashore, that can be provided by fixed wing air support

***RAAF opposition has long been a barrier to the acquisition of a ship-borne (integral) air capability. Having long ago lost its control of rotary wing flying, it wishes to retain control of fixed wing aircraft, no matter where they are operated.**

This proposal supports that aim and supports the one service control of the F35 and all its support facilities. It requires only that the aircraft is made available to the navy when required, to provide the support with which the air force has long been tasked. The essential difference this time is that would be a credible, an achievable support.

There is still an urgent need to develop a defence force that is, to the extent that is economically feasible, self reliant, and a fleet without integral fixed wing air support cannot, in this day and age be considered to be self reliant. The force requires to be able to respond to situations which may develop in and around our island home and in our neighbourhood, embracing at least New Zealand and our island dependencies. We must also be able to a reasonable extent, to protect our sea lines of communication, the loss of which would deny the nation the ability to resist an aggressor for more than a very limited period of time, given the crippling effects on our economy that would be suffered. Our 'Neighbourhood' should additionally encompass Papua New Guinea and our neighbour allies in the island chains to our north and in near Southeast Asia. A self reliant fleet is an essential element of any force charged with these tasks.

Let us recognise that our defence force may, in many credible combat situations, require to have that degree of self reliance in its own right, when our allies cannot provide support, when their priorities may be elsewhere. Self reliance must be the name of the game.

When will our government, of whatever persuasion, accept the fact that without credible fleet support, the RAN will not be self reliant and consequentially will not support Dobb's dream of a self reliant defence force.

The significant cost of providing fleet support in the form of organic air cover has been a major concern for governments in the past, as has the philosophical objection to 'forward defence'. The latter has mercifully disappeared and the former should no longer be a concern given that arguably, all the equipment is in the pipeline. All that is required is a change of heart about integral air support and the realisation that its inclusion in our defence force will provide a degree of 'force multiplication' and 'self reliance' that Australia has not enjoyed in the past, a self reliance that is, in small scale conflicts. Let us always be aware that in any global conflict, Australia will need the support of her allies, but in developing a defence force that is the best we can muster, we stand a better chance of receiving that support if and when the need arises.

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