

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

Amphibious Operations

Geo-strategic circumstances dictate that Australia adopts a maritime strategy, integral to which are amphibious operations – the projection of a military force from the sea onto a hostile, or potentially hostile, shore via assaults, withdrawals, raids or demonstrations. Australia is enhancing its capacity to deploy military power amphibiously across a range of contingencies, but is focused initially on security, stabilisation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,¹ *i.e.* paramilitary and military assistance operations rather than conventional amphibious operations.

Our Amphibious Operations Seminar on 27 May 2014 examined the development of amphibious operations over the last century and Australia's developing capability. Several lessons emerged relating to landing force size; amphibious tactics; fighter aircraft support; and amphibious vehicles.

Landing Force Size: The case studies showed that a typical contemporary amphibious task group with a battalion-sized landing force embarked can react quickly to contingencies, particularly when confronting non-state actors, terrorists, organised criminals or the like. It is suitable for raiding, non-combatant evacuations, and delivery of military assistance, but not for amphibious assaults. The only amphibious assault conducted this century, the 2003 British invasion of Iraq's Al Faw Peninsula, required a reinforced infantry brigade group – 3 Commando Brigade, Royal Marines, reinforced by 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, United States Marine Corps. A battalion-sized amphibious ready group lacks the land combat power needed for amphibious assaults against the forces of a nation-state.

Amphibious Tactics: Like its British and American counterparts, Australia is training its amphibious forces to avoid establishing a conventional beachhead wherever practicable and instead to employ direct ship-to-objective manoeuvre and sea-basing *i.e.* holding command and control, fire support and logistics facilities afloat. This is sensible for many amphibious demonstrations, raids, and withdrawals; and for many paramilitary and military support tasks. In some situations, it also may be suitable for seizing points of entry in the initial stages of an amphibious assault. But if the purpose of the assault is to establish a firm base for further combat operations inland or as a site for an advanced naval or air base, frequent reasons for such a mission, then at some stage, a firm base will need to be established ashore which can be defended against enemy counter-attack and within which the combat power and logistic

support needed for the subsequent operations can be built up – *i.e.* a conventional beachhead will need to be established. Australia should not neglect to train for this contingency.

Fighter Aircraft: During amphibious operations, it is vital that air superiority be maintained both during passage to the battle zone and over the amphibious operations area. The landing force also needs close air support during the assault and once ashore. Both tasks require fighter aircraft which can be either land-based or ship-based. In the former case, to ensure coverage of the amphibious task force, air-to-air refuelling may be needed – air-to-air re-arming is not possible. The United States Wasp-class 40,000-tonne amphibious assault ships (LHDs) can serve as 'lily pads' for fixed-wing fighter aircraft, enabling them to land, refuel, rearm and take off. Australia's two 27,500-tonne Canberra-class LHDs, two-thirds their size, will have correspondingly less capacity. While short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) fighter aircraft (*e.g.* F35 Lightning II B) will be able to land and take off from them, they will have little if any capacity to refuel and rearm the aircraft; and the deck will be unable to sustain frequent STOVL landings.

Amphibious Vehicles: Australia's LHDs will be equipped with a very capable landing craft, the 100-tonne LCM-1E). Where a beach is not protected by coral reefs, it will be suitable for landing main battle tanks and other heavy equipment and for logistic movements to and from ship and shore, although equipment and supplies will need to be discharged at the waterline, not on the beach or beyond. The LCM-1E, however, is not an amphibious assault vehicle. It provides only limited personnel protection; cannot transport assaulting infantry across the beach; and cannot undertake ship-to-objective manoeuvre. For this, the US Marines use the AAV-7A1, an amphibious, tracked, armoured personnel carrier that can carry a platoon from shipping over-the-horizon to its objective inland.

White Paper Implications: Australia's new amphibious force as currently configured is eminently suitable for paramilitary and military support operations, but less so for warfighting. Should Australia's 2015 Defence white paper conclude that Australia could become involved in warfighting between nation-states over the next 30 years, then it should provide for: an amphibious landing force of at least brigade size, backed up by at least one similar-sized reserve force; the conversion of at least one of the two LHDs to support the frequent landing, refuelling and rearming of STOVL fighters, and the equipping of this LHD with amphibious assault vehicles; the conversion of at least one of the F35 Lightning II squadrons on order from the A model to the B (STOVL) model; and the taking up of suitable ships from trade to transport the expanded landing force.

David Leece²

¹Department of Defence (2013). *Defence White Paper 2013* (Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra) paragraphs 8.13 - 8.14, page 77.

²David Leece, Editor of *United Service*, is President of the Institute. These are his personal views.