

Australia’s Amphibious Capability

Given Australia’s interest in maintaining a secure nearer region¹ and the maritime and archipelagic nature of that region, Australia must be able to lodge forces from the sea onto a potentially hostile shore – as the Australian Army, supported by the United States Navy, demonstrated in New Guinea in 1943 and Borneo in 1945. Our amphibious capability declined after World War II until the need became apparent again during the East Timor crisis in 1999. Since then, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has been redeveloping its amphibious capability.

In 2014, the Institute reviewed Australia’s re-emerging amphibious capability and its findings were published in this journal². At that stage, Navy had acquired three modern amphibious platforms: two *Canberra*-class amphibious assault ships or LHDs (landing, helicopter, dock); and one landing ship dock. Army and Air Force, though, were yet to come to grips with their respective roles. Further, the *Canberra*-class LHDs had been designed primarily to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, and had limited capacity to support higher-end warfighting, especially amphibious assaults.

Over the past five years, there has been substantial further development of the ADF’s amphibious capability, as reported by Captain David Tietzel (pp. 9-11) and Colonel Kim Gilfillan (pp. 9-14).

While individual warships (Fleet units) can be deployed on operations as part of a flotilla formed for a specific task (a ‘task group’), a task group needs the naval staff-equivalent of a brigade group headquarters to plan the operation and to command and control the task group as it undertakes the operation. The Fleet Battle Staff has been developed now to include an Amphibious Task Group staff and a Maritime Task Group staff, the latter to plan for, and to command and control, sea-control operations. The sea-control operation could be to protect the amphibious task group during its passage to, and while at, the site of an amphibious action.

The Australian Fleet, therefore, not only has acquired, crewed and commissioned a balanced array of Fleet units suitable for employment on sea control and/or amphibious tasks, it also now has the specialist staff able concurrently to command and control both an amphibious task group and a maritime task group. This is a major advance in the past five years.

Army also has taken substantial steps to develop a landing force capability. Initially, Army designated the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR), as an

amphibious trials battalion to develop techniques for all aspects of land-force based reconnaissance, combat and logistics. Since 2017, 2RAR(Amphib) has been re-roled to provide only the land-force component of the pre-landing force. The ground combat element of the landing force is now being provided, on rotation annually, by one of the ready battle groups of Army’s ready brigade. This approach has the advantage, over time, of spreading amphibious expertise across the Army, but has the disadvantage of needing to train and certify a new ground combat element every year.

As Colonel Gilfillan explains (pp. 11-12), depending on the task, the ground combat element can be scaled up from a combat team (a rifle company group), via an Amphibious Ready Unit (a battalion headquarters and two combat teams), to an Amphibious Ready Group (a battalion headquarters and four combat teams). The Amphibious Ready Unit (ARU) is the standard grouping currently provided by the ready brigade each year and, to date, two ARUs have been trained and certified as ready for operations. The high-end warfighting capability of the 2019 ARU was successfully demonstrated during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2019. So, in five years, we have gone from having no ground combat element to now having a ground combat element potentially of up to battalion group strength.

While this is commendable progress, major deficiencies in the ADF amphibious capability remain. Today, at best, the ADF would be able to make a modest contribution to an amphibious operation conducted by the United States Navy and Marine Corps, a capability it demonstrated during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2019. Some of the current deficiencies in the amphibious capability are force structure and manpower issues and others are equipment-related. Four key ones were pointed out in our 2014 report³. Those yet to be addressed, together with a new issue, are discussed below.

Landing Force Size

Despite the progress made in creating a ground combat element of up to battalion group strength, a force of this size is suitable only for confronting non-state actors and for raiding, non-combatant evacuations, and delivery of military assistance. A battalion-sized amphibious ready group lacks the land combat power needed for amphibious assaults against the forces of a nation-state. For that, the assaulting force needs to be at least an infantry brigade group, if not larger – as the Australians found in the Pacific War. The only amphibious assault conducted this century, the 2003 British invasion of Iraq’s Al Faw Peninsula, also required a reinforced infantry brigade group. Hence, the ADF ground combat element needs to be increased to brigade group size as soon as possible.

¹Defence (2016). *2016 Defence white paper* (Department of Defence: Canberra) p. 17.

²The proceedings of the Institute’s 2014 Amphibious Operations Seminar were published in *United Service* Vol. 65, No. 3, September 2014.

Amphibious Tactics

21st century amphibious forces usually avoid establishing a conventional beachhead wherever practicable preferring 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. It is very pleasing to see the ADF trained for this contingency in Exercise Talisman Sabre 19.

A new potential issue, though, is the decision that the Commander Landing Force will command the force through Headquarters Amphibious Task Group (see p. 12) rather than establish a separate headquarters. This arrangement may be cost-effective and efficient as long as the headquarters is 'sea-based' *i.e.* on the LHD. But I cannot see it working once a conventional beachhead is established. Then, the commander and his headquarters would need to move ashore to take command of the land battle. This would be especially true if, once the land force was firmly established ashore, the amphibious task group were to be redeployed on other tasks. Hence, a separate landing force headquarters is needed.

Fighter Aircraft

While Air Force has significant fighter and enabler assets, and the Amphibious Task Group headquarters now includes a tactical air control party, concern remains about Air Force's capacity to provide adequate air support for the task group beyond range of land-based 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, but 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, have correspondingly less capacity. While short take-off and vertical

landing (STOVL) fighter aircraft (*e.g.* F35 Lightning II B) are able to land and take off from them, they have little if any capacity to refuel and rearm the aircraft; and the deck is unable to sustain frequent STOVL landings. This could be a major limitation for amphibious operations unsupported by allies.

Amphibious Assault Vehicles

Australia's LHDs are each equipped with four 100-tonne LCM-1E landing craft (see cover photo). Where a beach is not protected by coral reefs, the LCM is suitable for landing main battle tanks and other heavy equipment and for logistic movements to and from ship and shore, although equipment and supplies need to be discharged at the waterline, not on the beach or beyond. The LCM, 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 U.S. 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. Landing craft had become obsolescent in the Pacific by the end of World War II, being progressively replaced by tracked amphibious vehicles. It is unacceptable that Australian infantry, 75 years on, are still expected to assault across beaches.

Defence Policy Implications

Australia's Minister for Defence announced in October that, driven by the pace of strategic change, a review is underway of defence readiness, including an update of force structure.

This is timely as the ADF amphibious force would be unable to conduct an amphibious assault unaided by allies. To correct this, the Minister's review should provide for:

- development of an amphibious landing force of at least brigade size, backed up by at least one similar-sized reserve force;
- the creation of a headquarters to command the ground combat element once ashore – perhaps it could take the form of a second deployable joint force headquarters;
- the acquisition and modification of a container ship to operate, refuel and rearm STOVL fighters, and/or the conversion of at least one of the two LHDs to support the frequent landing, refuelling and rearming of STOVL fighters;
- the acquisition of at least one F35 Lightning II B (STOVL) squadron;
- the acquisition of modern amphibious assault vehicles for the landing force; and
- the taking up of sufficient suitable ships from trade to transport the expanded landing force.

David Leece⁴

³Leece, D. R. (2014). Amphibious operations. *United Service* 65 (3), 7.

⁴Dr David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is chair of the Institute's Special Interest Group on Strategy. These are his personal views.