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DEVELOPING AUSTRALIA'S MARITIME CONCEPT OF STRATEGY

Lessons from the Ambon Disaster of 1942

by

Michael Evans

July 2000

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

2nd AIF	Second Australian Imperial Force
HQ 23 Inf Bde	Headquarters 23rd Infantry Brigade
AA	Australian Archives
ABDACOM	American, British, Dutch, Australian Command
ACH	area combined headquarters
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AHQ	Army Headquarters
ASP 97	Australia's Strategic Policy 1997 (document)
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bns	battalions
C4I	command, control, communications, computing and intelligence
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CDF	Chief of the Defence Force
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CMF	Citizen Military Forces
CO	Commanding Officer
COMAST	Commander Australian Theatre
DAA	defeating attacks against Australia
DCGS	Deputy Chief of the General Staff

DJFHQ	Deployable Joint Force Headquarters
DRI	defending regional interests
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GOC-in-C	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief
GSO 1	General Staff Officer Grade 1
HQAST	Headquarters Australian Theatre
HQNORCOM	Headquarters Northern Command
INTERFET	International Force East Timor
MC	Military Cross
NEI	Netherlands East Indies
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RN	Royal Navy
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USAAF	United States Army Air Force

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Australian War Memorial. The views expressed in this paper are, however, solely those of the author.

ABSTRACT

This paper uses a historical case study of the Ambon disaster of 1942 to try to determine lessons for the development of Australia's maritime concept of strategy in the early 21st century. The paper examines how, in 1941–42, Australia embarked on the strategy of a forward observation-line, using troops to secure bases for air forces in the northern archipelagos. The failure of this strategy is viewed through the lens of the Ambon disaster of February 1942.

The study examines how, with respect to defending Ambon, Australian strategy was hampered by a number of serious problems. These problems included the inherited weaknesses of the Singapore strategy; organisational unreadiness; chronic materiel deficiencies; a lack of balanced and mobile air, sea and land forces; and a command crisis. These challenging issues interacted with other pressures emanating from Allied higher defence-planning and the need for coalition operations to try to stem the Japanese offensive in the northern archipelagos. The paper attempts to show how the Ambon garrison, originally deployed as a tactical protection force, became a component in a strategic attempt by Australia and her Allies to use troop formations to slow down the Japanese advance. The Allied aim was to buy time for the arrival of American air reinforcements into the Pacific theatre. The study suggests that Australia's military failure on Ambon was the product of a systemic crisis in national defence policy combined with the imperatives of coalition strategy in the Pacific.

Drawing on the lessons of the Ambon experience, the paper suggests that the defence of Australia begins in the inner arc of the northern archipelagos. It argues that littoral operations in defence of this area can only be accomplished successfully by a maritime strategy that carefully balances land, sea and air capabilities. Accordingly, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) needs to harmonise concepts of land force littoral manoeuvre with amphibious capabilities and sea and air deployment to reflect the reality of a maritime battlespace. Finally the ADF needs to reassess command and force structure requirements for joint operations in the inner arc. The paper suggests that, because coalition operations in the defence of regional interests (DRI) facilitate defeating attacks against Australia (DAA), the former should be the key determinant in ADF force-structure planning for the foreseeable future.

Developing Australia's Maritime Concept of Strategy: Lessons from the Ambon Disaster of 1942

INTRODUCTION

In December 1997 the publication of Australia's *Strategic Policy* (ASP 97) marked the beginning of a transition in Australian security away from Defence of Australia towards a new maritime concept of strategy.[1] The major weakness of the 1997 strategic review was its tendency to present its maritime approach to strategy in rather narrow and navalist terms.[2] In September 1999, the logic for a broader and more refined maritime strategic concept was underlined when Australia deployed 4500 troops to East Timor in the Indonesian archipelago. This operation—the largest since the Vietnam commitment of the mid-1960s—reinforces the need for Australia to possess a defence strategy in the 21st century that supports the nation's security interests in its most vital area: the Asia-Pacific region.

This study argues that the most likely requirement for Australian defence-planning in the early 2000s will be to devise a maritime concept of strategy that has an integrated and joint focus. Australia cannot afford to embrace a maritime approach to strategy that does not reflect a proper balance between sea, land and air capabilities. To demonstrate the importance of having balanced capabilities across these three environments, this paper analyses the

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1 Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, Directorate of Publishing and Visual Communications, Canberra, 1997.

2 See Michael Evans, *The Role of the Australian Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, Working Paper No. 101, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Duntroon, ACT, September 1998.

events surrounding the Ambon disaster of 1942. On the Netherlands East Indies island of Ambon in early February 1942, an Australian infantry battalion group without naval and air support was overrun and defeated in detail by Japanese combined-arms forces in controversial circumstances. Through examining an earlier and disastrous maritime operation in the littoral, it is the intention of this paper to try to identify important lessons that might help both present and future Australian strategic planners.

There are only two recent and specialist scholarly studies of Australian military involvement in the Netherlands East Indies in 1941–42: Joan Beaumont's *Gull Force* and Peter Henning's *Doomed Battalion*. While both of these studies are valuable, they lean towards what might be termed the 'military social history' of prisoners-of-war and have limitations for students of defence planning and military operations.[3] In contrast, this paper's main concern is to analyse the strategic and operational dimensions of Australia's employment of military force on Ambon.

The aim of this study is to use Ambon as a lens to explore both Australian and Allied strategic planning and operational thinking in the period from March 1941 to March 1942. While there is an obvious link between the experience of the Australian forces deployed on both Ambon and Timor in the Netherlands East Indies in 1941–42, events in Timor are not a focus of this work. The

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[3] Joan Beaumont, *Gull Force: Survival and Leadership in Captivity, 1941–1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1988; Peter Henning, *Doomed Battalion: Mateship and Leadership in War and Captivity, The Australian 2/40 Battalion, 1940–45*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995.

situation on Timor is only referred to insofar as it affected thinking on Ambon among the Australian Chiefs of Staff; in Australian Army Headquarters; and in the American, British, Dutch, Australian Command (ABDACOM).

Five areas are examined. First, the paper discusses the background to the Ambon commitment by briefly examining the strategic threat that confronted Australian military planners in the Pacific. Emphasis is placed on the way in which, during 1941, Australia—with wholly inadequate forces and in conjunction with the Netherlands East Indies Government—attempted to embrace what would today be described as a maritime concept of strategy. Australia did this by creating a forward air observation-line in the South-West Pacific based on the islands of Rabaul, Ambon and Timor. The weaknesses of this strategy are identified and analysed. It is argued that in 1941–42 Australia lacked the defence infrastructure, doctrine and military resources to deploy naval, air and ground forces for operations in a maritime environment.

Second, the paper uses the situation in Ambon to illuminate the mechanics of Australian strategy between March and December 1941. During these eight months, Australia accepted a commitment to assist in the defence of the Netherlands East Indies. Army preparations for the defence of Ambon are analysed in order to expose how Australia lacked the operational means to execute her strategic aim of securing a forward line of air bases in the northern archipelagos. Deficiencies in military capability and equipment fuelled a crisis between local commanders on the one hand and Australian Army Headquarters on the other. This crisis came to a head after the outbreak of the

Pacific War in early December 1941, and Australian troops were deployed to Ambon.

Third, the paper examines the controversial circumstances surrounding the fall of Ambon. It attempts to demonstrate how—through a combination of materiel shortcomings, differing perceptions of command responsibility, and tensions between the needs of higher strategy and the realities of operations in the field—the strategy of the forward air observation-line collapsed between January and February 1942. Fourth, an attempt is made to 'explain failure' by examining the various organisational dynamics surrounding the defence of Ambon. It is argued that the loss of the island was due to the interaction of a number of political, strategic and operational factors that, when assessed together, represent a systemic crisis in Australian defence strategy in 1942.

Fifth, the paper attempts to 'learn from failure' by examining whether the lessons of Ambon have any applicability to contemporary Australian strategy. Drawing on the experience of operating in the 'inner arc' of the littoral in 1941–42, the paper argues that Australia's future maritime concept of strategy must reflect a truly integrated and joint focus.[4] Such a strategy must seek to harmonise concepts of maritime manoeuvre with amphibious capability and the changing roles of naval and air power in littoral warfare. Command and control arrangements must also facilitate the unity of operations with strategy. Finally, the paper suggests that Australian maritime strategy needs

[4] In Australian strategic planning, the inner arc refers to the littoral environment of the maritime approaches in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific, running from the Cocos Islands in the west through the Indonesian archipelago to the Solomon Islands in the east.

to give consideration to the primacy of regional coalition operations in future force-structure calculations.

The Background to the Ambon Commitment: The Japanese Threat and Australian Strategic Planning, September 1939 – March 1941

Australia experienced three phases in its strategic planning between the outbreak of World War II in Europe on 3 September 1939 and Australia's declaration of war on Japan on 8 December 1941. In the first phase, from September 1939 to November 1940, Australia concentrated on the role of the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the British Empire's fight against Germany and Italy. In the second phase, between November 1940 and May 1941, Australian defence planners became increasingly concerned at the imminent Japanese threat and the weakness of the Singapore naval strategy. The third phase, from June until December 1941, saw Australia move the focus of its war effort towards the security of the South-West Pacific.[5]

It is the second and third phases, which concern the South-West Pacific, that are of direct relevance to this study. During these phases Australia gave a commitment to hold defensive bases on Ambon and Timor in the Netherlands East Indies. Australia was ill prepared for commitments that implied an ability to conduct joint operations. For most of the inter-war period, Australia had forged its defence planning on the narrow anvil of the Singapore naval strategy. The Royal Navy (RN), operating from the Singapore naval base, was seen by successive Australian governments as the guarantor of the nation's security in the

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[5] David Horner, *High Command: Australia's Struggle for an Independent War Strategy, 1939–1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, p. 23.

Pacific. As Major General T. F. Cape, a young staff officer in 1940, has recalled, 'Singapore might come under severe pressure but few people expected such a bastion to fall at all, let alone quickly'.[6] Consequently, during the 1930s defence spending on the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was double that of the Army and over six times that of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).[7] In 1939, the RAN was small and designed for operations with the RN; the Army was affected by twenty years of financial neglect, and a concentration on continental defence had left it with both limited mobility and a largely obsolete armoury. For its part, the RAAF was badly under-equipped and possessed no modern fighters.[8]

The outbreak of war exacerbated these deficiencies. In 1939–40 the focus of the war effort was on Imperial defence. By the beginning of 1941, most Australian naval units were in the Mediterranean; the 6th and 7th divisions of the newly raised 2nd AIF were in the Middle East; and any significant RAAF modernisation was subordinated to

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[6] Author's discussion with Major General T. F. Cape (Retd), 26 April 2000.

[7] John Robertson, *Australia at War, 1939–1945*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1980, p. 7. See also John McCarthy, *Australia and Imperial Defence, 1918–1939: A Study in Sea and Air Power*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976; 'Planning for Future War 1919–1941: The Armed Services and the Imperial Connection', *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, 1990, no. 72, pp. 112–22; Brett Lodge, *Lavarack: Rival General*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, chaps 2–6.

[8] Colonel E. G. Keogh, *The South West Pacific, 1941–45*, Grayflower Productions, Melbourne, 1965, chap. 2; Horner, *High Command*, pp. 14–15.

the Empire Air Training Scheme.[9] The weaknesses of inter-war defence policy, combined with imperial commitments in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, meant that Australia's available forces to meet a possible war against Japan in the Pacific were limited.

It was against this ominous background that Australia sought security in the South-West Pacific through cooperation with the Netherlands East Indies. Many Australian politicians and military planners believed that a successful Australian defence strategy was closely linked to operations in the island arc in the north, stretching from the Netherlands East Indies to New Caledonia. In particular, a number of leading Australian politicians believed that public opinion would not tolerate a threat being allowed to develop in the northern archipelagos. As John McEwen, a former Minister for Air, put it, 'the position of the Netherlands East Indies in relation to Australia [is] similar to the Channel ports in relation to England'.[10]

In November 1941, Robert Menzies, the former Prime Minister, expressed the view that Australia's response to a hostile attack on the northern islands 'will not be decided on strategic grounds, but by the force of an irresistible public opinion'.[11] Earlier, when he was Prime Minister, Menzies had informed the British Naval Staff:

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[9] David Horner, *Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat, 1941–1943*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978, chaps 1–2.

[10] Advisory War Council Minute 560, 7 November 1941, Document 104 in W. J. Hudson and H. J. W. Stokes, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–49*, vol. V: July 1941 – June 1942, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1982, p. 180.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

> If Japan should establish herself in the Netherlands East Indies, Australian public opinion would undoubtedly insist on military action to eject her, as her presence in this region would strike at the very basis of Australian defence by introducing a very powerful threat to Singapore, and by enabling Japan to make an attack on Northern Australia with land-based aircraft. [12]

Menzies was drawing on a February 1941 appreciation of the situation in the Far East written by the Australian Chiefs of Staff, Lieutenant General V. A. H. Sturdee, Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin and Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett. The Chiefs believed that the defence of Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies and Australia represented a single strategic problem.[13] They noted the danger of the Japanese gaining forward operating-bases in the Netherlands East Indies and threatening Australian communications and concluded:

> Security in the Netherlands East Indies vitally affects that of Singapore and Australia . . . Naval and Air Forces should be employed [to] prevent the Japanese establishing naval and air bases within striking distance [of] our vital interests . . . Provision must be made [to] garrison outlying bases [to] ensure continued operations [of naval and air forces].[14]

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12 Note of Conversations at UK Admiralty, 8 March 1941, Document 343 in W. J. Hudson and H. J. W. Stokes (eds), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937–49*, vol. IV: July 1940 – June 1941, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1980, p. 483.

13 Australian Archives (henceforth cited as AA), CRS A2671, 64/1941, Combined Far Eastern Appreciation of Australian Chiefs of Staff, February 1941; Horner, *High Command*, pp. 55–6.

14 Combined Far Eastern Appreciation of Australian Chiefs of Staff, February 1941. For a good summary of this appreciation see Commonwealth Government to Lord Cranborne, UK Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 15 February 1941,

Given this strategic assessment, the Australian Chiefs of Staff recommended to the War Cabinet that air forces supported by troops from the 8th Division be established on Rabaul on New Britain and on the Netherlands East Indies islands of Ambon and Timor. Anglo–Dutch–Australian conferences on security were held in Singapore in October 1940 and in February 1941. At the February 1941 conference, the Australian Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Lieutenant General Sturdee and his Dutch counterpart, Major General H. ter Poorten, agreed that Australia should provide land forces to reinforce the Dutch island bases of Ambon and Timor respectively.[15]

On 22 March 1941 the Australian War Cabinet approved three measures to cooperate with the Dutch. First, there was to be 'an air striking force from Darwin to operate from advanced bases and to be established in collaboration with the Netherlands East Indies authorities at Ambon and Koepang [in Timor]'.[16] The two islands were to be forward operating-bases from which RAAF units stationed in

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Document 300 in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. IV, pp. 408–11.

15 AA CRS 5954 561/10, (Papers of F. G. Shedden) (Policy—Far East, Unified Command at Ambon, April–May 1941), Report of the Anglo–Dutch–Australian Singapore Conference, 22–25 February 1941; Commonwealth Government to Lord Cranborne, UK Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 27 March 1931, Document 366 in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. IV, pp. 516–20. See also War Cabinet Minutes (909), Agendum No. 109/1941, Anglo–Dutch–Australian Conference—Singapore, February, 1941, Document 132 in John Robertson and John McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy, 1939–1945: A Documentary History*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, pp. 170–3.

16 War Cabinet Minutes, 22 March 1941, Document 132 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, pp. 170–3.

Darwin would fly missions. RAAF units would use Halong, a Dutch naval and flying-boat base, and Laha airfield—both on Ambon—and Koepang airfield in Timor. It was estimated that the air forces available for the Darwin–Ambon–Timor area would consist of 'two bomber squadrons, and possibly an additional reinforcing squadron'.[17]

Second, two Army battalion groups, each of some 1200 troops in strength, were to reinforce Ambon and Timor respectively. The War Cabinet believed that the provision of an air striking-force and ground troops would allow Australia 'to participate in the forward line and thus to operate offensively'.[18] Despite the critical difficulties faced in training and equipping the 2nd AIF, Australian Army Headquarters agreed to station infantry formations in the northern islands to protect the air forces. Sturdee took the decision to deploy battalion groups to Rabaul, Ambon and Timor with 'great reluctance'. [19] He later explained that it was most important for Australia to have 'the earliest warning of the approach of Japanese forces and for this purpose air forces had to be established in the islands as far North as possible'. Troops were necessary because 'the Chief of Air Staff declined to establish air forces unless there were army garrisons to protect their air fields'.[20]

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17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

19 Australian War Memorial (henceforth cited as AWM) 67/384 (Official History, 1939–45 War: Records of Gavin Long: Lieutenant General V. A. H. Sturdee), Sturdee to Long, 8 February 1955.

20 *Ibid.*

Australia's strategy of a forward air observation-line had two major weaknesses. First, it required credible air-power, which was not available in 1941. At the Anglo–Dutch–Australian conference in Singapore in October 1940, it had been estimated that 346 aircraft would be required for the defence of the Netherlands East Indies alone. A further 894 aircraft were needed to protect Burma, Malaya and Australia.[21] In December 1941 first-line operational RAAF strength amounted to 175 aircraft, mainly Wirraway light bombers, Hudson medium bombers, Catalinas and Empire flying boats.[22] This force was just over half the strength needed to defend the Netherlands East Indies islands, yet it also had to help protect Malaya and Australia.[23] As the official historian of the RAAF Douglas Gillison has put it, Australia's strategy in the north was hamstrung by 'the impoverished state of the RAAF in operational aircraft'.[24]

The second weakness was that the movement of aircraft and troops to Ambon and Timor was not to occur until

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21 Douglas Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942*, vol. 1, Series Three (Air), Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 144.

22 AWM 54 422/7/8 (Appreciation on the Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas, December 1941), Appendix A3, 'Strength of RAAF Aircraft Available in Australia and NEI to Meet Attack—9. 12. 41'. There were 101 Wirraways, fifty-three Hudsons, twelve Catalinas and nine Sea Gull aircraft listed for first-line defence.

23 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 190–1. See also Memorandum for UK War Cabinet by UK Chiefs of Staff Committee, 11 April 1941, Document 450, in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. IV, pp. 568–76.

24 AWM 54 422/7/8, Appendix B3, 'State of Training of RAAF 1st Line Aircraft Crews as at 9. 12. 41'; Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 313, fn 3. Nine RAAF squadrons were serving in Europe and the Middle East.

hostilities with Japan commenced. In February 1941, the Australian Chiefs of Staff advised the War Cabinet that, 'unless the Australian forces are in position at Ambon and Koepang prior to war, there may be great difficulty in establishing them there in sufficient time to enable them to operate effectively'.[25] The recommendation of the Chiefs of Staff was not implemented for political reasons. While the War Cabinet recognised the operational advantages of moving Australian forces to Ambon and Timor as soon as possible, political sensitivities obliged it to seek the views of both the British and the Netherlands East Indies governments.[26] The most the War Cabinet could approve was that Australian equipment should be pre-positioned on Ambon and Timor in secret and with the agreement of the Dutch authorities.[27]

For different reasons, both the British and the Dutch were reluctant to agree to an Australian deployment before the oubreak of hostilities with Japan. The British Government was seeking American support for the defence of the Netherlands East Indies. It had also accepted the views of the hard-pressed Admiralty that the movement of Australian forces might precipitate a Dutch request for a specific guarantee of British support in the Pacific in the event of a Japanese attack.[28] For their part, the local Dutch

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25 Combined Far Eastern Appreciation of Australian Chiefs of Staff, February 1941.

26 War Cabinet Minutes, 22 March 1941, Document 132, in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 171.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Lord Cranborne, UK Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Mr A. W. Fadden, Acting Prime Minister, 22 May 1941, Document 464 in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. IV, pp. 667–70; Advisory War Council Minute 560, 7 November

authorities in Bandung feared the impact that foreign troops might have on the populations of Ambon and Timor, particularly on the Ambonese. They therefore sought to postpone Australian deployment until the outbreak of war.[29]

Australian concern at the inability to make operational preparations for the defence of both Ambon and Timor was demonstrated in October 1941. Both Arthur Fadden, Menzies' successor, and the new Australian Labor Prime Minister John Curtin pressed the British and the Dutch to agree to the movement of 100 Australian advance troops and small contingents of RAAF ground staff to both islands.[30] These requests were not met quickly. Only on 27 November—ten days before the outbreak of the Pacific War—did the Netherlands East Indies authorities agree to accept advance Australian forces on the islands. Even then, this concession applied only to RAAF personnel and not Australian troops.[31] It was not until 5 December 1941 that Britain finally accepted Australia's position and agreed to the 'urgent importance [for] the firmest basis for effective

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1941, Document No. 104 in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. V, pp. 179–80.

29 [Lord] Cranborne [Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs] to [Prime Minister John] Curtin, 27 November 1941, Document 135 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 174.

30 Fadden to Cranborne, 3 October 1941 and Curtin to Cranborne, 16 October 1941, Documents 133 and 134 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 173.

31 Curtin to Cranborne, 27 November 1941, Document 135, in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 174.

cooperation [with the Dutch] in meeting the present Japanese threat'.[32]

In early December 1941, the RAAF placed 2 Squadron at Laverton, 13 Squadron at Darwin and two Hudson flights from 24 Squadron at Townsville on notice of readiness to move to the Netherlands East Indies. Advance parties of RAAF ground and operations personnel left for Laha and Koepang on 3 December while an Area Combined Headquarters (ACH) was formed at Halong on Ambon.[33]

It cannot be stated with any degree of certainty whether better Australian preparations to defend Ambon and Timor in 1941 would have averted the disasters of early 1942. The inherited weaknesses of Australia's military forces due to the inadequacies of inter-war defence policy—combined with the demands of the war in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean—make such a prospect seem unlikely. What is clear is that the decision to deploy an infantry battalion on Ambon led to a difference of opinion between brigade and battalion commanders on the one hand and Army Headquarters on the other.

'Unpardonable Stagnation': The Australian Army and the Defence of Ambon, March 1941 – December 1942

In March 1941, following the Singapore agreement with the Dutch, the War Cabinet assigned the task of defending the forward operating-bases in the Netherlands East Indies to the 23rd Brigade of the 8th Division, 2nd AIF, stationed in Darwin. Two battalions—the 2/21 Battalion from Victoria,

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[32] Cranborne to Curtin, 5 December 1941, Document 138, in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 175.

[33] Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 190–1.

to be known as Gull Force, and 2/40 Battalion from Tasmania, codenamed Sparrow Force—were to assume responsibility for the defence of Ambon and Timor respectively. The Australian infantry force on Rabaul was also drawn from the 23rd Brigade, with 2/22 Battalion forming Lark Force.

The 28th Brigade was commanded by Brigadier E. F. Lind and Gull Force by Lieutenant Colonel L. N. Roach. Since the views and reports of these two officers are at the heart of the controversy over the loss of Ambon, it is important to establish their professional credentials. Both Lind and Roach were experienced soldiers with distinguished service records. During World War I, Lind served as a medical officer at Gallipoli in 1915 and later (from 1916 to 1918) in France, where he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). During the inter-war years he was a high-profile officer in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in Victoria, and in 1937 was selected to command the Australian military contingent at the coronation of King George VI.[34] Roach was also a Gallipoli veteran; he later served with the AIF in France, where he was awarded the Military Cross (MC). From 1918 to 1920 he served with the Indian Army in Persia and Afghanistan before returning to Australia and joining the CMF in Victoria.[35]

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[34] Peter Henning, 'Tasmanians in Timor 1941–42', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, October 1984, no. 5, pp. 15–23 and *Doomed Battalion*, pp. 6–7.

[35] AWM 67 3/328, Part 1 (Lieutenant Colonel L. N. Roach, 2/21 Bn), Lieutenant Colonel L. N. Roach MC, ED; AWM 43/C100 (Official History 1914–18 War), biographical file, L. N. Roach.

Between March and December 1941, Lind and Roach had the responsibility of preparing Gull Force for operations on Ambon. During this eight-month period, both officers developed deep reservations about the course of action being followed by Army Headquarters. These reservations revolved around the severe equipment problems and reconnaissance limitations imposed on 23rd Brigade in preparing for tropical warfare operations. Brigadier Lind's doubts about whether Gull Force could defend Ambon effectively began following a March 1941 report by the chief engineer of the 8th Division, Lieutenant Colonel E. G. B. Scriven, of the situation on both Ambon and Timor.

'No Scope for Manoeuvre': The Scriven Report and the Defence of Ambon, March 1941

Lieutenant Colonel Scriven's report outlined the operational difficulties of defending tropical islands with small and lightly armed infantry forces.[36] While Ambon—as part of the Moluccas group and situated between New Guinea, Timor, Celebes and the Halmahera islands—was strategically important because of its deepwater harbour, it was difficult to defend. The island extended for 53 kilometres in length and was characterised by a long coastline, rugged terrain and poor roads. The vital forward airfield at Laha could only be reached by motor launch or via a rough jungle track. There was only one primary road across the Latimor Peninsula. The local Dutch garrison numbered 2600 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel J. L. R. Kapitz. However, with the exception of a small

[36] AWM 54 573/6/11 (Ambon 1941–1942, Gull Force Reports). Copy of a report by Lt Col E. C. B. Scriven, CRE, 8th Division, on a visit to Ambon, March 1941, pp. 1–7.

command staff and a detachment of Dutch engineers, Kapitz's force comprised indigenous conscripts and volunteers.[37]

The Dutch defences on Ambon were concentrated around vital points on the Hitu and Latimore peninsulas of the island. These included the Laha airfield on the Hitu Peninsula; the Halong seaplane base; the fuel and equipment stores at Ambon Town on the Latimore Peninsula; and the Paso Isthmus, a strategic point connecting the two peninsulas. What was missing was the means to defend these vital points. The Dutch had weak artillery and possessed no significant naval or air support. There was only a single fixed artillery battery opposite Laha at Benteng across the Bay of Ambon along with a handful of anti-aircraft guns. Nine Catalinas at the Dutch seaplane base at Halong in Binnen Bay and two Brewster F2A Buffalo fighters at Laha airfield made up the Dutch air force on Ambon.[38]

Scriven pointed out that, because of the confined terrain of Ambon, 'there is no scope for manoeuvre, and the loss of the first line of resistance will bring the enemy close to a vulnerable locality'.[39] To try to overcome this lack of depth, reserves had to be strong and mobile, roads improved and several lines of resistance created, supported by artillery.[40] Scriven recommended that, for the effective defence of Ambon, a two-battalion force with two troops of mountain guns or howitzers was needed. The two battalions should be concentrated on the Latimore

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37 *Ibid.*
38 *Ibid.*
39 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
40 *Ibid.*

Peninsula with the exception of two companies that, with a troop of artillery, should be detached for the defence of Laha airfield on the Hitu Peninsula.[41]

Scriven noted that, to secure RAAF installations at Laha, Ambon's defending force would need to be motorised, while a large supply of Thompson submachine-guns would be 'most useful' for close-combat operations.[42] Scriven's description of the infantry tactics needed on Ambon reflected classic jungle-warfare conditions. He advised that 'infantry tactics will be largely . . . the holding of defensive positions in depth. Offensive positions in depth on hill paths and in jungle must be with the close cooperation of native infantry who are experts in moving through this rough country'.[43]

The Reconnaissance of Ambon, May and October 1941

Lind and Roach were soon able to supplement Scriven's report with personal assessments of conditions on Ambon. In May 1941 Lind received permission from Army Headquarters to undertake a secret reconnaissance of both Ambon and Timor. On 19 May, a party from 23rd Brigade including Lind, Roach and Lieutenant Colonel G. A. D. Youl, the commanding officer of Sparrow Force, left Darwin for Ambon and Timor dressed as civilians. After viewing the Dutch defences on Ambon, Roach described the tactical outlook of the Dutch as too defensive and inflexible.[44] The May 1941 reconnaissance of the islands threw strong doubts into the minds of both Lind

41 *Ibid.*
42 *Ibid*.
43 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
44 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Headquarters 23 Inf Bde: Visit to Netherlands East Indies, 28 May 1941.

and Roach as to whether Gull Force possessed sufficient mobility and adequate heavy-weapons to mount a credible defence of the islands.[45] In a report to Army Headquarters, Lind emphasised the need for effective firepower on both Ambon and Timor:

> It is considered that [Bren] carriers would be most valuable in this country . . . The carriers would enable fire power to be moved readily and would facilitate defence. Their use would make defence of the [aero]dromes easier. In addition they are required for counter offensive action . . . The complete lack of artillery including anti-tank guns would be a serious handicap to infantry defending this area. It is strongly recommended that at least one troop of field guns be added to the garrison. Anti-tank guns should be allotted when available.[46]

Lind stressed that, as it was not intended to despatch troops to the islands 'until an attack appears imminent', it was important that all officers down to company commander level be given the opportunity to reconnoitre the tropical terrain. He also recommended the establishment of military liaison with Netherlands East Indies Army Headquarters at Bandung in order 'to keep [Australian] army headquarters informed of Dutch tactical methods and to impress on Dutch army headquarters the need for an offensive spirit and of the suitability of Australian troops for a counter offensive role'. Finally, Lind asked to visit Army Headquarters in Melbourne to discuss several of the issues raised.[47]

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45 *Ibid.*; AWM 54 573/6/7 (Reconnaissance Koepang and Ambon), Report by Brigadier E. F. Lind, Commander 23rd Australian Infantry Brigade, 28 May 1941.

46 AWM 54 573/6/7, Report by Brigadier E. F. Lind, 28 May 1941.

47 *Ibid.*

There is no record of a reply to Lind's correspondence, either from Major General D. V. J. Blake, General Officer Commanding (GOC) the 7th Military District in the Northern Territory or from Army Headquarters in Melbourne. However, in June and July 1941, while on sick leave in Melbourne, Lind took the opportunity 'to make strong personal representations to the C[hief] of S[taff] and Director of Military Operations with reference to [the] inadequacy of numbers–armament of projected forces to proceed to Amboina and Timor'.[48] Throughout July and August, Lind continued to press for Bren carriers and adequate artillery for both Gull Force and Sparrow Force.[49]

It was perhaps partly due to these representations that, in October 1941, Lind received permission to undertake a more detailed tactical reconnaissance of Ambon with a party that included Roach and Gull Force's company commanders. The reconnaissance, which took place from 6 to 12 October, seems to have confirmed Roach's worst fears concerning the ability of Gull Force to defend Ambon. Only thirty hours were allowed on Ambon, and Roach called the mission 'almost a waste of money and certainly of opportunity'.[50] In his official report, Lind believed that it was dangerous to rely on Dutch artillery:

> I feel very strongly that to send these [Gull and Sparrow] forces without supporting [Australian] artillery, when they expect to

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48 See AWM 52 8/2/23 (Headquarters 23 Infantry Brigade), Brigadier E. F. Lind to GOC L of C Area, Melbourne, 10 September 1942, para. 4.

49 See, for example, AWM 54 573/6/7, Lind to Army Headquarters, 7 July 1941.

50 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Statement by Lt Col L. N. Roach to the Minister [for the Army] at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, on 26.6.42.

> have to fight [a] well-equipped enemy, would be grossly unfair to our troops. It would amount to sending them to carry out a task for which they were not fully equipped. Both forces [Sparrow and Gull] should go with their full complement of carriers, and Bren guns on full war equipment scale should be issued.[51]

Lind was also critical of the Netherlands East Indies Government's preparations for the defence of Ambon. Like Roach, he had developed reservations about the Dutch forces on Ambon, identifying 'half-heartedness' and a 'lack of drive [among] Dutch army officers'. The brigade commander warned: 'no part of our force should be committed to either Ambon or Timor until the Dutch show by results that they attach as much importance to the well-being and safety of our troops as we ourselves do'.[52] He pleaded for permission to visit Melbourne 'to discuss the whole matter in person. The many questions involved cannot be satisfactorily dealt with on paper'.[53]

There is little evidence to suggest that Lind's requests in October were taken any more seriously than those he had expressed in May. On 5 December 1941 Army Heaquarters issued Operation Instruction No. 15, ordering Gull Force to deploy to Ambon. This instruction was precipitated by the imminent departure of two flights of RAAF Hudson bombers to Ambon and Timor following an official request

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51 AWM 54 573/6/4 (Gull and Sparrow Force, Outline Plans of Commanders for defence of Ambon and Timor), Lind to Army Headquarters, 'Reconnaissance Reports, 6–12 October', 28 October 1941.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

from the Netherlands East Indies for Australian assistance.[54]

According to Operation Instruction No. 15, Gull Force and Sparrow Force became detached forces operating under the direct command of Army Headquarters. However, beyond saying that Gull Force was 'to cooperate with the Dutch Command in all operational plans', neither 23rd Brigade Headquarters nor Roach received detailed operational instructions about the role of the battalion group.[55] Indeed, Roach only received a copy of Operational Instruction No. 15 on 13 January 1942—twenty-seven days after his arrival on Ambon. As Lind later recalled, beyond an order to deploy, 'no instructions, no information, no orders were received by Comm[an]d[er]s 2/21 and 2/40 Bns—before or on embarkation'.[56] As one military historian has noted, Lieutenant Colonel Roach left for Ambon 'without any orders or instructions defining his role or the policy he was to pursue . . . Such information is . . . vital to the commander of a detached force. Without it he has no idea what he is expected to accomplish'.[57]

Not surprisingly, Roach was angered and dismayed by his situation. On 17 December, Gull Force—comprising 1159 personnel of 2/21 battalion supported by an antitank troop, an engineer section and signals and ordnance elements

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54 Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, vol. IV, Series One: Army. Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 419.

55 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, 'Copy of Para 7 of AHQ Operational Instruction No. 15 dated 6 December 1941'.

56 AWM 52 8/2/23 (HQ 23 Infantry Brigade), Brigadier E. F. Lind to GOC L of C Area, Melbourne, 10 September 1942, para. 6.

57 Keogh, *South West Pacific*, pp. 112–13.

from 23rd Brigade—disembarked on Ambon.[58] The force was ill equipped, and Roach gave a candid assessment of his feelings to Lieutenant Colonel W. J. R. Scott, the General Staff Officer Grade 1 (GSO 1) with primary responsibility for Ambon at Army Headquarters. The Gull Force commander stated that, from March to December 1941, there had been 'an unpardonable stagnation' in preparing his battalion for operations on Ambon. His troops possessed no artillery, only four anti-aircraft guns and a mere twenty-six automatic weapons, half of which were elderly Lewis guns without spare parts.[59]

Roach believed that, to be effective, Gull Force urgently required a troop of twenty-five pounder guns, two troops of antitank guns, more anti-aircraft guns, a supply of automatic weapons and two more infantry companies.[60] He indicted Army Headquarters for its neglect, remarking harshly: 'it [Army policy] all points to a policy of "wait and see" prevailing over reality and [of] expediency. If any of my excellent fellows do not arrive at their destination it will not be a case of "gallant sacrifice" but of murder due to sheer slackness and maladministration'.[61]

Roach's views were fully shared by Brigadier Lind. Shortly after the fall of Ambon, Lind produced one of the most damning reports ever written by a senior Australian Army officer during World War II. Lind's report noted that eight

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58 AWM 67 3/328, Number of Personnel Embarked from Darwin for Ambon, 14 December 1941.

59 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Scott, 13 December 1941. See also Statement by Lt Col L. N. Roach to the Minister [for the Army] at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, 27. 6. 42.

60 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Scott, 13 December 1941.

61 *Ibid.*

months had been available for provision of adequate personnel and armament, and for cooperation with the Dutch, the RAN and the RAAF.[62] In the absence of liaison with the Netherlands Command in Bandung, 'preparations for reception of forces concerned were inadequate and the capacity for effective communication with Netherlands East Indies Forces at Amboina and Timor was not developed'.[63] The report went on to state that there were no effective lines of communication established; naval and air cooperation failed to materialise; and Gull Force lacked firepower in the form of field artillery and anti-aircraft guns. Both Gull Force and Sparrow Force were 'embarked and dispatched on tasks of first magnitude without orders from executive authority at AHQ', which ignored essential representations from 23rd Brigade command.[64]

There can be little doubt that Gull Force lacked both the numbers and necessary equipment to defend Ambon. As David Horner has noted, 'Army Headquarters must be indicted for failing to assess realistically the chances of these [island] garrisons'.[65] The weaknesses and shortcomings of Gull Force were made known throughout 1941 to Army Headquarters, which chose to ignore the representations from Lind in Darwin.

This neglect can be explained largely by the staggering deficiencies confronting Army Headquarters on every aspect of preparing to wage modern warfare: from lack of trained troops, to experienced staff officers through to

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62 AWM 52 8/2/23, Brigadier E. F. Lind to GOC L of C Area, Melbourne, 10 September 1942, para. 1.

63 *Ibid*., para. 2.

64 *Ibid*., paras 3–8.

65 Horner, *Crisis in Command*, pp. 35–6.

chronic shortages of military materiel.[66] Between December 1941 and February 1942, Australia's available pool of AIF troops in the South-West Pacific area was some 34 000. Of this number 17 000 were in Malaya; 2400 were earmarked for deployment to Ambon and Timor; and another 14 000 were assigned to the 7th Military District in the Northern Territory.[67]

By coincidence, in December 1941, the CGS and Deputy CGS—Sturdee and Major General S. F. Rowell—were also CGS and Vice CGS after the end of the Pacific War. In February 1948 both officers recalled the extraordinary deficiencies in weapons, personnel and equipment during the early months of the Pacific War. Munitions of all kinds—especially Bren guns and other automatic weapons—had to be allotted on a priority basis direct from factories. The only formed bodies of troops in Australia were the 23rd Infantry Brigade and the 1st Australian Armoured Division, and both lacked firepower and mobility. The former did not have artillery, while the latter did not have tanks.[68] Rowell recalled that the Army

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66 *Ibid.* See also AWM 54 422/7/8, Chiefs of Staff Appreciation, 11 December 1941, Appendix D2, 'Army Matters of First Degree of Priority to be Put in Hand Now'.

67 Report by Chiefs of Staff, 24 January 1942, Document 155 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, pp, 196–7; AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Australian–Canadian Cooperation in the Pacific—Appreciation of Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 29 January 1942, Appendix A, Army Resources.

68 AWM 54 492/4/38, Part 1, Military History Section: Records—Special Histories, Interviews and Narratives, 'Comments on US War History, vol. 1, chap. 1, by Lt Gen V. A. H. Sturdee, CB, CBE, DSO, Chief of the General Staff, Australian Military Forces and Lt Gen S. F. Rowell, CB, CBE, Vice Chief of the General Staff, Australian Military Forces', 5 February 1948, paras 5–6.

possessed no field guns of a date later than 1912; broomsticks were used to represent antitank guns, while there was virtually no motor transport.[69] According to Sturdee and Rowell, it was not until June 1942 that forces on Australian soil achieved a reasonable level of readiness and, even then, many units were not at 'the full battle requirement'.[70]

None of the above problems absolve Army Headquarters from its neglect of Gull Force, but they do help to explain the incapacity demonstrated throughout 1941. The tragedy for an undermanned and under-equipped Gull Force was that, once hostilities against Japan broke out and the Australian force was deployed on Ambon, a series of military and political factors combined to make both reinforcement and withdrawal impossible.

Prelude to a Military Disaster: The Strategic Context of the Defence of Ambon, December 1941 – February 1942

The fate of Gull Force on Ambon was sealed not only by a prewar lack of preparation and equipment shortages during 1941, but by two other factors. First, it is clear that, in late 1941 and the early weeks of 1942, the Australian Chiefs of Staff were determined to try to hold Ambon as part of the

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Henceforth cited as Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948.

69 Lieutenant General S. F. Rowell, 'Where Does the Army Stand Today?', *Australian Army Journal*, June–July 1949, no. 7, p. 5.

70 AWM 54 492/4/38, Part 1, Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948, paras 5–6. See also AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Australian–Canadian Co-operation in the Pacific—Appreciation of the Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 29 January 1942, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 4, para. 8.

strategy of the forward air observation-line. Second, the organisation of a new and higher Allied command for the South-West Pacific affected the fate of Gull Force on Ambon. In January 1942 the formation of ABDACOM, with its headquarters in Batavia in the Netherlands East Indies, ensured that the Australian strategy of not surrendering the forward Dutch island territories became a component of broader Allied policy.

In the tense and dramatic weeks between the bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 and the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, the forward-base strategy of the Australian Chiefs of Staff and of ABDA was rapidly overwhelmed by continuous Japanese military successes. A brief analysis of the close relationship between Australian and broader Allied military planning is essential to understand the strategic context surrounding the fall of the Ambon garrison.

The Australian Chiefs of Staff and the Defence of the Netherlands East Indies

Between the outbreak of war in the Pacific in early December 1941 and the end of January 1942, the defence of the Malayan Peninsula and the chain of northern islands of the 'Malay Barrier' was the key to Australian politico-strategic thinking. During this time the military appreciations prepared by the Australian Chiefs of Staff, Sturdee, Colvin and Burnett, emphasised the importance of securing a strategic glacis to the north of continental Australia.[71]

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[71] Horner, *High Command*, p. 155.

On 11 December 1941 an Australian Chiefs of Staff appreciation emphasised that, if Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies bases to the north fell, the Japanese would be in a position to launch an invasion of Australia.[72] The Chiefs noted that gaining respite by fighting Japan in the northern islands was essential. On 15 December 1941 the Chiefs of Staff stated in a supplementary appreciation: 'whether and when it will become Australia's time [to face invasion] will depend on the outcome of operations in Malaya and possibly the Netherlands East Indies'. They considered the role of Rabaul in a 'proposed chain of air bases across the Pacific', recommending against withdrawing or reinforcing 2/22 Battalion on the island.[73] Rabaul was to be held both as an 'air operational base' and an 'advanced observation line'.[74] Although they were referring to Rabaul, the Chiefs of Staff outlined the policy that would also apply to both Ambon and Timor:

> In making this recommendation we desire to emphasise the fact that the scale of attack which can be brought against Rabaul from bases in the Japanese Mandated Islands is beyond the capacity of the small garrison to meet successfully. Notwithstanding this, *we consider it essential to maintain a forward air observation-line as long as possible and to make*

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72 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas—Appreciation by Australian Chiefs of Staff', 11 December 1941, para. 6. See also AA CRS A2671 (War Cabinet Agenda Files, 1939–1946), Item 14/301/227, 'Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas—Appreciation by Australian Chiefs of Staff', December 1941; Horner, *High Command*, pp. 142–3; and Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 236–7.

73 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Chiefs of Staff Appreciation—Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 15 December 1941, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 1, para. 8. The chief areas in question were Ambon, Timor, Port Moresby, Rabaul, New Caledonia and Suva.

74 *Ibid*., paras 12 and 14.

> *the enemy fight for this line rather than abandon it at the first threat'*.[75]

The policy of 'no reinforcement – no withdrawal' in the northern approaches became the rationale for holding Ambon and Timor, as both islands were an intrinsic part of Australia's strategy of the forward observation-line.[76] In this way, two small garrisons originally deployed for the defence of airfields were transformed from tactical to strategic formations. In January 1942, Sturdee admitted that Gull Force lacked the means to repel a major attack on Ambon, but he added: 'great value should accrue, however, if the enemy is denied the island except by the employment of overwhelming force'.[77] Withdrawal from the Dutch bases was viewed as not only strategically risky, but politically unacceptable, given the security arrangements made between the Australian and the Netherlands East Indies governments in Singapore in February 1941. As Dr H. V. Evatt, Minister for External Affairs, told Richard Casey, Australia's diplomatic representative in the United States, national strategy had to consider 'the psychological effect which a voluntary withdrawal would have on the minds of the Dutch in NEI [Netherlands East Indies]'.[78]

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75 *Ibid*., para. 15. Emphasis added. See also Horner, *Crisis in Command*, pp. 34–5.

76 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 141–2.

77 AWM 54 573/6/10B (Messages Exchanged between Gull Force and Army Headquarters), Minute by the Chief of the General Staff: 'Command of Australian Forces in Ambon', (no day) January 1942.

78 Evatt to Casey, 13 December 1941, Document 174 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 217.

Yet, to be effective, Australia's defence of the forward observation-line required joint-service and combined-arms striking power. As already noted, AIF troops lacked equipment, firepower and mobility. Sturdee and Rowell described the naval and air resources for operations in the northern archipelagos at the outbreak of the Pacific War as 'almost non-existent'.[79] The RAN had only two heavy and three light cruisers in home waters; RAAF aircraft for operations in the Netherlands East Indies numbered thirty-six Hudson medium bombers and seven Catalina flying boats.[80] Even had more-modern aircraft been available, there was no engineering organisation to provide for rapid operational expansion.[81]

Not surprisingly, in December 1941 Sturdee and Rowell considered that reinforcing the north-eastern approaches was 'quite impracticable having in view the availability of Naval and Air Forces, the standard of readiness for battle and the state of equipment of the troops available'.[82] The CGS and DCGS recalled:

> In view of these crippling limitations, the decision of the Australian Chiefs of Staff not to reinforce the North Eastern approaches seems unchallengeable . . . *Whatever the number of troops deployed, the effective defence of bases to which they would have been moved would not have been possible without*

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79 AWM 54 492/4/38, Part 1, Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948, para. 2.

80 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Australian–Canadian Cooperation in the Pacific—Appreciation of Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 29 January 1942, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 4, para. 9; Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 79; Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, chap. 7.

81 AWM 54 492/4/38, Part 1, Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948, para. 3.

82 *Ibid*., para. 2.

> *naval and air forces sufficient to support the land forces in this defence, and keep open the lines of communication to these bases from Australia.* Such naval and air forces were not available and such action could therefore only have resulted in the investment of the garrisons concerned and their defeat.[83]

In December 1941, RAAF aircraft on Ambon comprised two Hudson flights from No. 13 Squadron stationed at Laha.[84] An air-defence appreciation drawn up by the Officer Commanding 13 Squadron, Squadron Leader J. P. Ryland, stated that the requirement for an effective defence of the two Dutch East Indies island bases was a minimum of five squadrons: two medium bomber squadrons and three fighter squadrons. Ryland also considered that two more airfields would be needed on Ambon, along with an adequate refuelling and engineering infrastructure.[85] Supplying these resources was beyond Australia's military capacity in the early weeks of the Pacific War. As Gillison has noted, 'the Australian Chiefs of Staff faced a military situation for which they had no immediate answer. Without the aircraft to strike at the enemy before he struck and to meet his assaults when they came, they were virtually powerless'.[86]

In the early weeks of the Pacific War, then, the Australian Chiefs of Staff were shackled by the inadequacies of inter-war defence policy and by eighteen months of concentration on the war against Germany and Italy. The Singapore strategy of the 1930s had offered security in the Pacific through a Mahanian concept of naval command of the sea at the expense of joint-service and combined-arms

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83 *Ibid*., para. 7. Emphasis added.
84 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 192; 241–2.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
86 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

forces, especially aircraft and mobile ground-forces. At the end of 1941, the Chiefs of Staff were caught between the Scylla of a cold politico-strategic logic, which dictated that the Japanese be held as far from Australian soil as possible, and the Charybdis of a lack of operational readiness and and an absence of joint and combined forces. Australia's acute difficulties in defending the Netherlands East Indies were complicated further by the new Allied command arrangements of January 1942—arrangements that reinforced the strategy of the forward observation-line.

ABDACOM: The Allies and the Defence of the Netherlands East Indies, January – February 1942

From 29 December 1941 to the surrender of Gull Force on 3 February 1942, the defence of Ambon was closely affected by the formation of the ill-fated ABDACOM—a new and hastily formed Allied command designed to prosecute the war against Japan. The new command organisation was created in the wake of Pearl Harbour and covered a huge area comprising Burma, Singapore–Malaya, the Philippines, the Netherlands East Indies, New Guinea and north-western Australia.[87]

The inception of the new command as the coordinator of strategic operations effectively institutionalised the Australian–Dutch policy of holding forward island-bases.

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87 Report by the Chiefs of Staff, 'Washington Conversations. Allied Plans for the Defence of the Pacific', Document 152 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, pp. 192–3. For the background to ABDACOM see Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare*, Department of the Army, Washington DC, 1953, pp. 123–6 and Roger J. Bell, *Unequal Allies: Australian–American Relations and the Pacific War*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1977, pp. 88–94.

At the Singapore conference of 18–20 December 1941—which immediately preceded the formation of the ABDA area—the Allies agreed that 'the enemy must be held as far north [of Malaya] as . . . possible . . . and prevented from acquiring territory, particularly airfields, from which they could threaten the arrival of reinforcements'.[88]

As will be seen, this decision was to prove a critical factor in determining the fate of Gull Force on Ambon. A leading British soldier, General Sir Archibald Wavell, with Lieutenant General George H. Brett of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) as his deputy, commanded the ABDA area, with his headquarters in Batavia. ABDACOM lasted for six weeks and was little more than an exercise in Allied crisis-management. The new command—understaffed, poorly equipped and with inadequate joint forces—functioned in an atmosphere in which 'immediate tactical anxiety supervened'.[89]

On 3 January 1942 a directive from the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) in Washington outlined Wavell's responsibilities:

> The basic strategic concept of the ABDA Governments for the conduct of the war in your area is not only . . . *to maintain as many key positions as possible*, but to take the offensive at the earliest opportunity and ultimately to conduct an all-out offensive against Japan. The first essential is to gain air superiority at the earliest moment, through the employment of

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88 G. Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939–1942*, vol. 1, Series Two: Navy, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, Collins in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1985, pp. 501–2; Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 275.

89 John Connell, *Wavell: Supreme Commander, 1941–1943*, Collins, London, 1969, p. 94. See also Major General S. Woodburn Kirby, *War Against Japan*, vol. 1, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1957, pp. 268–91.

> concentrated air power. The piecemeal employment of air forces should be minimised.[90]

Wavell was instructed 'to hold Malaya barrier defined as line Malaya Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, North Australia as basic defensive positions of ABDA area and to operate sea, land and air forces in as great a depth as possible forward of barrier to oppose Japanese southward advance'.[91] Burma and Australia were to be held as 'essential support positions for the area' and lines of communications were to be established through the Dutch East Indies to support the Philippines garrison.[92]

Wavell faced extraordinary difficulties in making ABDACOM effective. In the words of an American official historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, the swiftness of the Japanese advance was like 'the insidious yet irresistible clutching of multiple tentacles. Like some vast octopus it relied on strangling many small points rather than concentrating on a vital organ'.[93] The speed of the Japanese advance was facilitated by their ability to seize advanced island-positions. These positions then formed an interior network of operational bases that permitted swift transfer of combined forces from point to point and forced the Allies to fight along far-flung, exterior lines. Japan's skilful strategy in the northern islands was noted in early February

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90 Directive for Wavell, 2 January 1941, Document 151, in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 189. Emphasis added.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid*.

93 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific, 1931 – April 1942*, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. III, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1965, p. 292.

1942, when an Allied intelligence report stated: 'they [the Japanese] have achieved a position which is the *inner arc* of a circle of attack, while our weaker defending forces now hold only the longer and more difficult system of aerial communications'.[94]

ABDACOM's immediate defensive weakness was its lack of air power. In January 1941 Japanese air-superiority was thought to be four to one.[95] On 2 January 1942 Wavell decided 'to maintain a line of bases, Darwin–Timor–Java–Southern Sumatra–Singapore, on which to build up, [sic] above all, an air force capable of securing local air supremacy'. Wavell believed that this line represented 'the limit of present resources'.[96]

It is important to note that Ambon was forward of this strategic line. Ambon, unlike Timor, was not seen by ABDACOM as an essential link in the reinforcement of Java.[97] Without Timor, fighter aircraft could not be flown from Australia to Java. As Wavell noted, unless Koepang was held, 'movement of short range aircraft reinforcements between Australia and Java becomes impossible and movement of shipping must take a wide detour'.[98] One option was to reinforce Timor with Gull Force, but Wavell's directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff insisted on holding all of the Netherlands East Indies possessions. In this decision he was supported by the

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94 Director, Combined Operational Intelligence Centre, 'An Appreciation of Japanese Strategy', 8 February 1942, cited in G. Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*, p. 531, fn 8. Emphasis added.

95 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 275.

96 Wavell to Chiefs of Staff, 2 January 1942, reproduced in Connell, *Wavell*, p. 90.

97 Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 131.

98 Henning, *Doomed Battalion*, p. 67.

Australian Chiefs of Staff, who noted on 29 January that, 'with the encirclement of the Philippines, Ambon is virtually in the front line'.[99] They went on to state, 'withdrawal from Ambon would be a very difficult operation and in any case it [is] important to hold Ambon as long as possible to deny it to the enemy'.[100]

Significantly, when in late January 1942 Wavell requested an additional Australian battalion to reinforce Timor, he asked for one stationed at Darwin.[101] Sturdee replied that a battalion from Darwin would have little effect in preventing a Japanese landing on Timor, adding: 'presume you have already considered reinforcing Koepang from Ambon?'.[102] The Commander-in-Chief United States Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Thomas C. Hart, advised that an unreserved withdrawal of Allied forces from Ambon was necessary.

On 24 January Hart informed both ABDACOM and RAAF Headquarters: 'report Ambon . . . indicates great danger from Japanese menace and without proper fighter support this base must be abandoned soon'.[103]

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99 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Australian–Canadian Cooperation in the Pacific—Appreciation of Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 29 January, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 4, para. 13.

100 AA CRS A5954 552/4 (Operations in ABDA Area: Defence of Ambon), Advisory War Council Minute 724/1942: 'Operations in ABDA Area', 30 January 1942.

101 Henning, *Doomed Battalion*, pp. 66–7.

102 AA CRS A5954/532/1 (Australian Troops at Rabaul, Java, Timor and Ambon: Question of Relief and Maintenance), Central War Room to ABDACOM (cablegram), 24 January 1942.

103 AA CRS A5954/352/1 (US Navy Department Communiqués, 1941–1942), Hart Communiqué, 24 January 1942.

However, Wavell was not prepared to abandon Ambon.[104] His decision to maintain the Ambon garrison forward of their air base-line can be explained largely by Dutch and American pressure. Both nations were determined to ensure that ABDACOM operations were projected northward 'to provide maximum defence in depth' to secure both Dutch possessions and the lines of communication with the Philippines.[105]

In early January 1942, at the first conferences of the ABDA Combined Staff in Singapore, Dutch and American officers insisted on the need to hold and reinforce Allied forward air-bases at Ambon, Kendari, Samarinda (Dutch Borneo) and Sabang (Sumatra).[106] This approach was supported strongly by the US defence attaché to Australia Brigadier General Raymond E. Lee and by the US Army Asssistant Chief of Staff in Washington Brigadier General Leonard T. Gerow.[107]

Holding Ambon and other Dutch East Indies forward air-bases required rapid air-reinforcement. As Curtin noted, 'our [Australian] experiences at Ambon and Rabaul have emphasised the urgent necessity for fighter aircraft'.[108] The Americans attempted to respond to the vital need for combat aircraft. In early January the US Government

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104 AA CRS A5954 552/4, Advisory War Council Minute 724/30, (no day) January 1942: 'Operations in ABDA Area'.

105 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 299; Connell, *Wavell*, p. 93.

106 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 369; Connell, *Wavell*, p. 93.

107 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 299–300.

108 Mr John Curtin, Prime Minister to Mr Winston Churchill, UK Prime Minister, 23 January 1942, Document 294 in Hudson and Stokes, *Documents*, vol. V, p. 465.

promised to deploy nine USAAF air groups—two heavy-bomber and two medium-bomber groups, one light-bomber group and four fighter groups—into the ABDA area. In particular, fighter squadrons were to be deployed to Koepang, Ambon, Kendari, Samarinda, Surabaya and Batavia as soon as possible. In order to provide immediate reinforcement for the ABDA area, the Americans planned to deliver six heavy bombers a day by flying these aircraft from the continental United States to the Pacific.[109] By 6 January 1942, twenty Flying Fortresses and six Liberators were en route from the United States to ABDACOM. A further forty-five Fortresses and nine Liberators were being prepared for flight, and 160 of the same heavy-bomber types were to be sent to Wavell direct from North American factories.[110]

Yet the real need was for fighter aircraft in the islands. Such aircraft required proper engineering infrastructures, fuel resources and camouflaged pens, but these were unavailable. However, the US plan to deploy fighter squadrons to Koepang, Ambon, Kendari, Samarinda, Surabaya and Batavia came to nothing. As Gillison points out, 'these were days when plans were made one day and cancelled the next. The very pressure which demanded speed in the delivery of aircraft and supplies often caused delay through confusion due, in turn, to haste'.[111] Units and equipment were often separated; the inadequacy of tools and parts caused delay, while inexperienced American pilots—even some with only fifteen hours training—were

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109 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 311.

110 *Ibid*.

111 *Ibid*., p. 381.

sent to fight in the defence of the Netherlands East Indies.[112]

Perhaps because of these problems, Wavell remained concerned at the potential cost to his forces of trying to hold all of the northern island-bases. On 11 January 1942, following another round of staff conferences, he warned the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington of the dangers of dispersal:

> At discussion on general strategy of theatre . . . [the] Dutch and [the] American[s] [were] insistent on [the] importance of holding . . . forward bases and [were] inclined to suggest that if they fall into enemy hands they will render our bases in rear (for instance Sourabaya) untenable. While I fully recognise [the] importance of holding these places if possible, we simply cannot afford to scatter our limited forces in trying to hold everything of importance in this enormous theatre . . . we shall be beaten in detail if we try to hold everything.[113]

Confronted by Dutch and especially American insistence on holding the islands while reinforcements were rushed to the ABDA area, Wavell adopted the Australian Chiefs of Staff strategic position of 'no reinforcement – no withdrawal'. He told the Combined Chiefs of Staff: 'my present conclusion is that we cannot afford to reinforce these forward garrisons now though we should not withdraw existing garrisons'.[114] In coming to this conclusion, Wavell appears to have believed that he could buy time for US air reinforcements by using the troop concentrations on the island bases to impede the speed of the Japanese advance. Wavell compared the Allies'

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112 *Ibid.*

113 Wavell to Combined Chiefs of Staff, 11 January 1942, reproduced in Connell, *Wavell*, p. 93.

114 *Ibid.*

strategic situation in the Netherlands East Indies in 1942 with that which they confronted in Greece in 1941:

> It might have been more prudent to let Greece go, and concentrate on holding Crete . . . It might possibly have been more prudent here [in the Far East] to let the NEI go and to concentrate on making Burma and Australia secure. But undue prudence has never yet won . . . wars, and from the political point of view it would have been as unthinkable to abandon our stout-hearted Dutch allies without the utmost effort to help them as it would have been a year earlier to leave the gallant Greeks unsupported . . . The principle of engaging the enemy as closely and as far forward as possible must be maintained at all costs . . .[115]

Thus, Australian forces on Ambon and Timor became pawns on the chessboard of Allied grand-strategy while Wavell sought to resolve what he described as 'the time problem between the rate of Japanese advance and the arrival of reinforcements'.[116]

However, by mid-January 1942, the Malay barrier was rapidly crumbling. On 11 January the Japanese seized Tarakan and Menado. They were now threatening Rabaul, Kendari and Balikpapan, thus almost cutting off the Philippines from the Netherlands East Indies.[117] On 15 January Wavell wrote from ABDACOM Headquarters in Batavia a gloomy appreciation of his position. He thought that Japan's intention was to attack Singapore and to seize air bases within range of Java as well as to take 'measures to cut [the] supply route between Australia and Netherlands E[ast] Indies by occupation of Amboina, Timor and

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115 Cited in Beaumont, *Gull Force*, p. 44.

116 Gill, *Royal Australian Navy*, p. 521.

117 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 205.

positions further East to command Torres Strait'.[118] Examining Balikpapan, Samarinda, South Celebes and Ambon, the ABDA Commander concluded: 'we can do little to defend [them] against large-scale attack'.[119]

In practice, then, despite theoretical plans to supply the ABDA area with effective air-forces, such reinforcements were weeks if not months away. The retention of the island bases was therefore, as the Australian Chiefs of Staff recognised, 'a race against time'—a desperate measure to achieve reinforcement by holding a forward defence-screen to impede the advance of a highly mobile enemy.[120] However, against Japan's combined forces, Wavell, with inferior air and naval resources, could offer no more than a token defence of the northern island-chains. The course of events on Ambon demonstrates how vulnerable land forces were in facing the Japanese without air and naval support.

'Purposeless Sacrifice': The Fall of Ambon and the End of the Strategy of the Forward Line, December 1941 – February 1942

With the strategic context of Ambon established, it is now possible to examine the sequence of events on the island from 17 December 1941 to 3 February 1942. In these critical weeks, a clash of views developed between Lieutenant Colonel Roach, the commanding officer of Gull Force, and Australian Army Headquarters. Roach's

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118 Wavell to British Chiefs of Staff, 15 January 1942, Document 154 in Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 195; Connell, *Wavell*, pp. 99–101.

119 Robert Woollcombe, *The Campaigns of Wavell, 1939–1943*, Cassell, London, 1959, pp. 176–8.

120 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Defence of Australia', 16 January 1942, Chiefs of Staff Paper no. 3, para. 8.

representations to Army Headquarters regarding Gull Force's inadequate numbers, armament and lack of clear orders increased after the Australians' arrival on the island. His repeated signals to Sturdee and Rowell created a crisis of confidence in his leadership ability.

Roach's views were shared not only by other Gull Force officers, but by several other commanders on Ambon, notably the RAAF senior officer Wing Commander E. D. Scott. On 14 January 1942, Sturdee replaced Roach as Gull Force commander with the GSO 1 at Army Headquarters Lieutenant Colonel Scott. At the same time, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, ordered the RAAF detachment to hold Ambon until ABDACOM issued orders to the contrary. In Bandung, Wavell supported the orders of Sturdee and Burnett, and Ambon fell to the Japanese on 3 February 1942.

Roach's Assessment of Ambon's Defence

On arrival in Ambon on 17 December 1941, Gull Force became part of a combined Dutch–Australian military force, commanded by the senior Dutch officer Lieutenant Colonel Kapitz. The Dutch believed that a Japanese landing on the steep, jungle-covered south coast at Hitu-lama or Paso was impractical, and they concentrated their troops in the north. The Australians were to defend the southern end of the Latimor Peninsula and Laha airfield.[121]

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121 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Lieutenant Colonel W. J. R. Scott, 7 December 1941; AWM 54 573/6/10 (Messages Exchanged between Gull Force and AHQ), Roach to Scott, 1 January 1942.

Roach quickly concluded that the combined force represented no more than a token defence of the island. He wrote of Kapitz and the Dutch force: 'probably due to . . . years of service in tranquil settings and [in] such comfort, it seemed inevitable that he [Kapitz] and his Force, would be of little use in action against a major power'.[122] The Gull Force commander was concerned to discover that the Dutch had only enough ammunition for five days of fighting. The Dutch military's shortage of munitions—combined with Gull Force's lack of artillery, anti-aircraft weapons and Bren guns—meant that the combined force possessed an alarming lack of firepower.[123] In addition, air and naval support was parlous. Air support was confined to twenty aircraft: eight American and Dutch flying boats, ten RAAF Hudson bombers and two Dutch Brewster Buffalo fighters. Naval support consisted of two harbour motor-launches and a RAN sloop.[124]

On 24 December 1941 Roach signalled Army Headquarters, requesting that Gull Force be reinforced by two troops of twenty-five pounder field artillery, two troops of antitank guns, six mortars, four medium machine-guns and two additional infantry companies.[125] However, he warned that, even with additional firepower and troops, 'the holding of this place [Ambon] cannot be assured without adequate

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122 AWM 67 3/328, Part 2 (Lt Col L. N. Roach MC, Personal Records), Roach to Lionel Wigmore, 29 January 1954.

123 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 'Disposition of Gull and NEI Forces', 27 December 1941 and 'Statement by Lt Col Roach to the Minister [for the Army] at Victoria Barracks on 26.6.42', p. 4.

124 AWM 67 2/31 (Records of Gavin Long, Notebook No. 31), Notes on Roach by Long, 16 September 1943.

125 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Gull Force to Army Headquarters, 24 December 1941.

Naval and Air support and cooperation'.[126] The island was so vulnerable to a pincer attack that Roach doubted whether the combined Dutch–Australian force could 'hold vital localities more than one day or two against determined attack from more than one direction simultaneously'.[127]

In response, Major General Rowell informed Roach that no additional Army units or weapons were available. The DCGS went on to state: 'your job in co-operation with local Dutch forces is to put up the best defence possible with the resources at your disposal'.[128] This communication only seems to have added to Roach's growing sense of frustration. A few days later the Gull Force commander sent a scathing letter to Lieutenant Colonel Scott at Army Headquarters. Roach told Scott that he was finding it difficult ' [to] overcome a feeling of disgust, and more than a little concern at the way in which we have seemingly been "dumped" at this outpost position'.[129] According to Roach, Army Headquarters' 'policy of a dissipation of strength' was a sacrifice of valuable lives and material that amounted to the throwing away of Gull Force for little gain.[130] He pointed out the deficiencies that lay at the heart of the strategy of the forward defence-line:

> It is surely the policy, either to hold this [Ambon] and other smaller localities, to safeguard the North of Australia, or not to hold them. If it is to be the former, then adequate means should be placed at the disposal of the Comd. to carry out his role. If it is the latter, then he should be clearly informed that he is expected to hold on to a certain stage, and then to evacuate, in

126 *Ibid*.
127 *Ibid*.
128 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Army Headquarters Melbourne to Area Command Headquarters, Halong, 26 December 1941.
129 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Roach to Scott, 1 January 1942.
130 *Ibid.*

> which case it is possible . . . that a proportion of the Force thus evacuated, would be able to concentrate somewhere South . . . and thus strengthen the position there.[131]

In Roach's view, the existing policy invited defeat in detail and placed 'heroics above realities'. In the event of Ambon being lost, Roach asked Scott to lay his letter before the Minister for the Army to try to 'put a stop to [further] avoidable catastrophes'.[132] This latter request directly challenged the command chain and implied a loss of confidence in Army Headquarters.

Roach seems to have genuinely believed that the Australian Army hierarchy was ignorant of the situation on Ambon and the islands. On 11 January, as Japanese air activity became more menacing, he suggested that an urgent conference be held in Darwin to discuss the future of the detached forces on Ambon and Timor.[133] Army Headquarters replied curtly: 'regret cannot approve in present circumstances'.[134]

On 13 January 1942, Roach signalled the Central War Room in Melbourne that, given the overwhelming strength of Japanese combined forces now operating from Menado, it was clear that Gull Force 'could *not* hold out for more than *one* day' without additional firepower and adequate air and naval support. Roach stated: 'to avoid purposeless sacrifice [of] valuable manpower and arms I recommend

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131 *Ibid.*

132 *Ibid.*

133 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Gull Force to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 11 January 1942.

134 AWM 54 573/6/10B, cited in Roach to Land Headquarters, Melbourne, 23 November 1943.

immediate evacuation [of the] combined force'.[135] According to Sturdee, Roach also sent an unauthorised copy of this signal to Wavell—an action that indicated to the CGS that Roach had 'lost his punch' as a field commander.[136]

Roach's recommendation for withdrawal was supported by Gull Force's second in command, Major Ian Macrae, and by Captain Edgar S. Tanner, an Army Headquarters intelligence liaison officer, who arrived on Ambon on 12 January as an observer. Macrae later recalled that Roach was simply 'unable to face the prospect of his command being eliminated in its first encounter without being in an area where mobility and manoeuvre could be employed'.[137] After attending a briefing of Gull Force officers, Tanner concluded that the position on Ambon was indeed hopeless. In a personal signal to Sturdee, Tanner not only recommended immediate withdrawal to avoid 'disaster and [the] futile sacrifice of valuable men', but added, 'respectfully request this be shown to the Minister [for the Army] who will see from perusal the urgency of the case'.[138]

In his representations to Army Headquarters, Roach received no support from Lieutenant Colonel Scott. Indeed, the opposite was the case. Scott came to regard Roach with

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135 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Gull Force to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 13 January 1942. Emphasis in original.

136 AWM 67 3/384, Sturdee to Long, 8 February 1955. It should be noted that there is no record of this message in the Roach files held at the Australian War Memorial.

137 AWM 67 5/19 (Gavin Long File: Revisions Ambon), Major Ian Macrae to Long, 3 October 1950.

138 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Gull Force to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, Captain Edgar S. Tanner for GGS, 13 January 1942.

what one historian has described as unfathomable 'malice and vindictiveness'.[139] When Scott received Roach's recommendation for withdrawal from Ambon, he described its wording unfairly as 'hysterical', reflecting both 'defeatism and entire lack of morale'.[140] Scott was contemptuous of Roach, describing him as 'a failure as a battalion commander' and as being 'too busy . . . [on Ambon] sending signals of distress to attend to his duties'.[141]

Without delay, Scott approached the Director of Military Operations and Plans and volunteered to replace Roach immediately. As a headquarters staff officer, Scott was familiar with the desperate politico-strategic situation that confronted Army Headquarters. His request to replace Roach was couched in a phraseology that could only have appealed to the harried General Staff:

> A good fight [on Ambon], even against overwhelming odds now, must stiffen resistance everywhere, and clinch our association with NEI, not to mention the effect on the USA. Withdrawal . . . will set the pace for future threats, or worse, in the near Pacific . . . and Australia itself. It could affect the action of all troops in Malaya . . . I am concerned that there is a political significance behind this [defence of Ambon] which

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139 Beaumont, *Gull Force*, p. 10. Both men were militia officers, and one can rule out any legacy of staff corps – militia rivalry. Nonetheless, Scott's dislike of Roach permeates the former's correspondence to an extraordinary degree. For a discussion of staff corps – militia rivalry see David Horner, 'Staff Corps versus Militia: The Australian Experience in World War II', *Defence Force Journal*, January–February 1981, no. 26, pp. 13–26.

140 AWM 54 573/6/1B, Part 1 (Report on Ambon and Hainan by Lt Col W. J. R. Scott), Scott Report, April 1946, p. 1.

141 AWM 67 3/353, Scott to L. G. Wigmore, 15 June 1954.

> may be well worth consideration at least. I should be proud indeed . . . to take over from CO Gull Force.[142]

Scott was duly appointed Commander of Gull Force on 13 January 1942, and at fifty-three became the oldest battalion commander in the AIF. His task was to 'assist the Dutch Forces to defend the island of Ambon with the object of delaying for as long as possible the southward advance of the enemy with the available troops and equipment under your [his] command'.[143] Scott recorded, 'I was very well aware that I was taking on a job which held out no hope of survival'.[144] Indeed, an Army Headquarters minute noted officially that Scott's mission promised exactly that—'virtually no chance of survival'.[145]

Between 11 and 14 January, as the Japanese overran Tarakan off Borneo and Menado on the Celebes, there was a flurry of messages between Ambon and Melbourne. Rowell sent Roach a personal cable that read:

> We [Army Headquarters] are completely aware of enemy situation as represented [in] your series [of] messages. These should cease at once and your attention [should] be given carrying out instructions contained in last paragraph MC 4060 26/12. Your situation is being closely watched. Your staunch defence will have [an] important effect [on the] officers and men in regard to future Australian–Dutch cooperation'.[146]

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142 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Scott to Director of Military Operations and Plans, 11 January 1942.

143 AWM 54 573/6/1B, Part 1, Scott Report, April 1946, p. 3.

144 AWM 67 3/353 (Files of Gavin Long: Colonel W. J. R. Scott), Scott to L. G. Wigmore, 15 June 1954.

145 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Confidential Minute by Director of Military Operations and Plans, 13 March 1942.

146 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Rowell to Roach, 13 January 1942.

It is clear from the documents available that Roach's disgust at what he regarded as Army Headquarters' bankrupt strategy was now matched by Sturdee's loss of confidence in Roach as a field commander. Sturdee viewed Ambon as part of a greater strategic plan under the direction of Wavell. The CGS judged Roach in the harshest possible terms. He believed that Roach was personally unfit to lead the defence of Ambon since his 'letters and messages . . . indicate the extent to which his fears have taken possession of him. He has given the impression of having accepted defeat as inevitable even before being attacked'.[147] To Sturdee, Roach had not only 'lost his punch', but was 'a squealer' and an 'alarmist'. To the CGS, Roach's 'lack of spirit' was eroding the fighting morale of Gull Force and undermining Dutch–Australian relations at the very time ABDACOM was being organised at Batavia.[148] An Army Headquarters cable noted: 'CGS [is] gravely concerned at [the] possible effect of [the] views [of] Colonel Roach on [the] morale [of] Gull Force and on relations with [the] NEI force'. It went on to add that a 'stout defence' in cooperation with the Dutch was of 'the greatest importance to the morale of all other forces and on relations with NEI Force in Ambon'.[149]

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147 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Minute by the Chief of the General Staff: 'Command of Australian Forces in Ambon', (no day) January 1942.

148 *Ibid*. See also AWM 67 3/384, Sturdee to Long, 8 February 1955. Sturdee commented, 'I might say I did not receive any similar squeals from [the Australian commanders on] Rabaul and Timor'.

149 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Army Headquarters, Melbourne to Mildistrict, Darwin, 13 January 1942. This cable was not sent; it does, however, give a valuable insight into Sturdee's view of Roach.

Not surprisingly, both Wavell and the Dutch CGS, General ter Poorten, agreed with the decision to replace Roach on Ambon.[150] Wavell informed Sturdee that the position on Ambon did not seem critical. He went on to state: 'in any case I am opposed to handing out important objectives to the enemy without making them fight for it . . . If circumstances allow [I] hope to fly there [to Ambon] for short visit soon'.[151]

On 14 January 1942, Army Headquarters Operation Instruction No. 29, signed by Rowell relieving Roach from command of Gull Force, was carried to Ambon personally by Lieutenant Colonel Scott. In the instruction, Rowell ordered Roach to hand over command to Scott immediately since 'you have not the necessary confidence in your ability to conduct a resolute defence of Ambon in cooperation with the local Dutch forces'.[152] On his return to Melbourne, Roach was, as he put it, 'turfed out' of the AIF when he was informed by Rowell that he was 'not to be further actively employed'.[153] Despite many personal representations, Roach never succeeded in changing the official Army verdict that he was guilty of a 'lack of fighting spirit' while commanding on Ambon.[154]

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150 AWM 54 573/6/10B, ABDACOM Batavia to Army, Melbourne (Sturdee from Wavell), 15 January 1942; GHQ Bandoeng to Army Headquarters, Melbourne (Sturdee from ter Poorten), 17 January 1942.

151 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Wavell to Sturdee, 15 January 1942.

152 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Department of the Army, Military Board, 'AHQ Operation Instruction No. 29, 14 January 1942', para. 1.

153 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Roach to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 9 February 1942.

154 Roach's personal campaign for vindication is a fascinating study of command philosophy in its own right and is the subject of a forthcoming paper by the author. However, the details of Roach's

On 17 January, Scott signalled Army Headquarters in Melbourne that he was 'extremely satisfied [with the] morale [of] our troops. Impressed with Col Kapitz commanding Dutch troops. His morale, also [that of] his troops, could not be higher'.[155] Evidence from other sources does not match Scott's optimism. Many of Gull Force's officers wanted to resign in protest over Roach's dismissal, but Major Macrae dissuaded them from taking this course of action.[156] In his book on Ambon, Courtney T. Harrison, a Gull Force veteran, calls Scott's message of 17 January a 'remarkable statement' by an officer who was 'a total stranger' to the Australian troops on Ambon.[157] He goes on to state that, once the news of the sudden change of command spread throughout the troops, they were 'outraged by his dismissal. Roach had been a trusted and highly respected Commander of the 2/21st Bn from its inception'.[158]

The RAAF and the Defence of Ambon

It is important to note that Roach's assessment of Gull Force's survival was not that of a lone and demoralised officer. Both Roach and Tanner claimed that several Allied

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case are outside the scope of this paper. The key documents can be found in AWM 54 573/6/10; AWM 67 3/328, Parts 1 and 2; AWM 67 3/384 and 2/31; and AWM 113 MH 1/121, Part 1 (Inquiry into the Japanese Landings at Rabaul, Timor and Ambon, 1942–1946).

155 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Scott to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 17 January 1942.

156 AWM 67 2/31, Long Notes: Captain W. T. Jinkins, 16 September 1943.

157 Courtney T. Harrison, *Ambon: Island of Mist*, T. W. and C. T. Harrison, North Geelong, 1988, pp. 39; 41.

158 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

officers on the island supported withdrawal from Ambon.[159] Some senior officers of the RAAF, the Dutch Navy and the USAAF on the island seem to have shared Roach's view that, unless 'fighter and augmented bomber support can be given, together with some Naval assistance, . . . the garrison [on Ambon] must inevitably suffer the same fate as [that of the one in] Hong Kong'.[160]

The actions of the RAAF contingent provide clear evidence of the grave crisis facing the combined force on Ambon. Throughout January 1942 the senior RAAF officer on Ambon, Wing Commander Scott, urged RAAF Headquarters to either reinforce or withdraw from Ambon. He warned that Ambon was at the mercy of Japanese-fleet air arm-bombers and long-range fighters, and that 'fighter protection [in] this area [should] be regarded as [a] priority matter'.[161] On 7 January, evidence of Ambon's vulnerability was demonstrated when Japanese aircraft bombed Laha and Halong; between 12 and 15 January, four Hudsons and both Dutch Buffalo fighters were shot down by Japanese Zero aircraft.[162]

On 12 January, with Japanese aircraft established at Menado, Kendari and Kema in the Celebes, Wing Commander Scott signalled the Central War Room, Melbourne:

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159 According to Major General ter Poorten, Kapitz did not recommend withdrawal. The Dutch CGS informed Sturdee that 'there is no question of any deterioration [in the] morale [of] NEI troops'. See AWM 54 573/6/10B, GHQ Bandoeng to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 17 January 1942.

160 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Roach to Scott, 1 January 1942.

161 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 273.

162 *Ibid.*, pp. 305–7.

> With present equipment Ambon could not resist for one day . . . Again urgently request immediate reinforcements by fighters and dive bombers. Suggest Tomahawks and Wirraways respectively . . . Only token resistance possible with present unsuitable a.cft [aircraft] all of which will certainly be destroyed in one day's action against carrier borne forces. Enemy has definite sea control as well as air superiority . . . Intelligence predicts allies supply line through Torres Strait and Darwin will be cut within one week of capture of Ambon.[163]

There is no doubt that the situation on Ambon was critical. As Gillison puts it, 'those unhappy words from Halong on 12 January—"only token resistance possible with present unsuitable aircraft"—were true of the whole Allied position throughout the Far East and the Western Pacific'.[164]

In response to his urgent message, Wing Commander Scott received a personal signal from the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Burnett, who had just returned from a conference in Bandung with Wavell and Brett. Like Sturdee, Burnett took the view that the position of Ambon now fell under the control of the new ABDA Headquarters and that Dutch–Australian solidarity had to be maintained at all costs. He informed Wing Commander Scott:

> The position of Ambon is within the control of the Commander-in-Chief in NEI *and must form part of the whole strategical plan and cannot be considered alone*. It must therefore be held until orders are received from the Supreme Commander, General Wavell. I feel sure you would be the first to protest if Australians were withdrawn leaving Dutch alone to meet attack. Congratulate those concerned on good work accomplished.[165]

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163 AWM 67 5/19, Area Command Headquarters, Halong to Central War Room, Melbourne, 12 January 1942.

164 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 322.

165 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Chief of Air Staff to Scott, 14 January 1942. Emphasis added.

On the same day, Burnett informed Wavell: 'from information at my disposal [I] do not consider [the] position [on] Ambon as yet critical or more serious than our position at Rabaul'.[166] Wing Commander Scott replied to Burnett that, while RAAF resistance on Ambon would be resolute, it was unlikely that the Japanese would be 'seriously inconvenienced' by the aircraft at his disposal.[167] Unlike Roach, however, Wing Commander Scott accepted the decision of his higher commander without demurring. The RAAF commander on Ambon expressed regret if his signal 'was considered to imply lack of Dutch–Australian solidarity'. All Wavell's orders would be 'implemented by Australians in this area in a manner which will not derogate from their reputation'.[168]

As noted earlier, frantic plans were afoot by the Americans to reinforce the air forces in the ABDA area, and Wavell hoped to deploy a detachment of Kittyhawk or Buffalo fighters to operate from Ambon.[169] Although some 300 American P-40 fighters were being rushed to the ABDA area, little could disguise the deteriorating situation in the northern islands. Wing Commander Scott's estimation of 12 January was followed by a frank situation report on 21 January by the RAAF commander of North-Western Area at Darwin, Air Commodore D. E. L. Wilson. This report, which described the vulnerability of the RAAF

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166 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Chief of Air Staff to ABDACOM, Batavia, 14 January 1942.

167 AWM 54 573/6/10B, Wing Commander Scott to Central War Room, Melbourne, 16 January 1942. See also Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 310.

168 *Ibid.*

169 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, p. 311.

Hudson aircraft on Ambon and recommended their withdrawal, was passed immediately to Burnett.[170]

In a sharp response, the Chief of the Air Staff reminded Wilson that 'units of the RAAF and AIF were at Ambon . . . to reinforce ABDA Command . . . ACH Halong was responsible to Central War Room, Bandung, and not Central War Room, Melbourne'.[171] Burnett added that Wavell had decided that he was not prepared to give up an important key point such as Ambon without fighting, and 'it would be impossible for RAAF Headquarters to withdraw squadrons without Wavell's orders'.[172]

Yet, by mid-January, all USAAF personnel and aircraft on Ambon had been evacuated to Sourabaya.[173] Perhaps because of this development, combined with the acute shortage of Allied aircraft, Wing Commander Scott and Squadron Leader Ryland obtained permission from RAAF Headquarters to fly to Bandung in order to brief General Brett on the Ambon situation. On arrival at ABDA Headquarters on 24 January 1942, both officers recommended that the RAAF elements should be withdrawn to Darwin if adequate strength in fighters and anti-aircraft weapons could not be provided for Ambon. Brett admitted that ABDACOM could provide no reinforcements and authorised the RAAF's withdrawal from Ambon.[174]

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170 *Ibid.*, p. 373.
171 *Ibid*.
172 *Ibid*.
173 AWM 67 3/328, Part 1, Tanner to Roach, 16 January 1942.
174 See Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp. 374–5.

While Brett was reviewing the question of reinforcement or withdrawal, RAAF Hudsons were in constant operation and were suffering losses. By the time the order to evacuate was given on 26 January, Nos 2 and 13 Squadrons had lost sixteen aircraft over the Netherlands East Indies.[175] On 29 January an armada of twenty-seven Japanese ships, including two aircraft carriers, was reported by a RAAF reconnaissance flight. Rather unkindly, the evacuating RAAF personnel told troops from Gull Force: 'if you could see what's coming in that convoy . . . you'd find a canoe and start paddling for Australia'.[176]

On 31 January 1942, units of the Far Eastern Detachment under Major General Takeo Ito attacked Ambon, with the aim of cutting the lines of communication between Australia and Java.[177] The Japanese ground-force of 5300 troops and marines did not greatly outnumber the combined Dutch–Australian force. The decisive factors in the Japanese assault were firepower and combined arms, including light tanks, mountain artillery detachments, naval gunfire and carrier aircraft.[178]

Given overwhelming Japanese air–sea superiority, events unfolded much as Roach had predicted. The Japanese attacked the southern coast of the Latimore Peninsula, avoiding the major fortification of Benteng and quickly

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175 *Ibid.*

176 Quoted in Beaumont, *Gull Force*, p. 47.

177 Lieutenant Colonel Susumu Tozuka and Military History Section, Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, *Ambon and Timor Invasion Operations*, Japanese Monograph No. 16, Office of the US Chief of Military History, Washington DC, 1953, pp. 1–2.

178 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–7 and AWM 54 573/6/16 (Reports: Invasion of Ambon and Timor, 1942), 'Report on the Japanese Invasion of Ambon by Lieutenant I. H. McBride, 2/21 Bn', 1 April 1942.

capturing Ambon Town. The Dutch were encircled, and their resistance collapsed within twenty-four hours.[179] The Australian positions at Kudamati, Amahusa and Laha were enveloped, and after three days of fighting Lieutenant Colonel Scott surrendered on 3 February 1942. Japanese casualties were fifty-five dead and 135 wounded. Australian casualties were relatively light—perhaps fifteen killed and some thirty wounded. However, at Laha airfield, Japanese troops committed an atrocity by summarily beheading or bayoneting to death 309 prisoners. Among this number was Wing Commander Scott and several RAAF personnel, none of whom had been able to evacuate before the Japanese attack.[180]

When Ambon was liberated in September 1945, 74 per cent of the prisoners were found to have perished—one of the worst death rates of Allied troops in Japanese captivity. Of Gull Force's 1159 personnel, only 302 survived the Japanese attack and subsequent imprisonment. There can be little doubt that, on Ambon, the strategy of the forward observation-line exacted a terrible price in Australian lives.

Explaining Failure: Ambon and Australian Military Strategy, February 1941 – February 1942

Two weeks after the fall of Ambon on 15 February 1942—the day Singapore surrendered—Sturdee recommended an end to the strategy of the forward observation-line that the Chiefs of Staff had favoured since early 1941. In a memorandum, the CGS strongly urged the Government to concentrate on holding continental Australia as a strategic

179 *Ibid.*

180 Harrison, *Ambon*, p. 79.

base from which to develop an Allied counteroffensive.[181] He later recalled how the Chiefs of Staff, after seeing Army battalion groups 'gobbled up' on Rabaul and Ambon, decided that it would be 'an act of folly' to continue to sacrifice Australian troops when it was now clear that they could not hold up the Japanese advance for any appreciable gain.[182] By the end of February 1942, the War Cabinet accepted a strategy of continental defence. In March, General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Australia as supreme commander of Allied forces in the South-West Pacific Area.

Many strategic commentators and prominent military historians have severely criticised Australian and Allied strategy during the first three months of the Pacific War. Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Navy, described the Allied campaign against Japan between December 1941 and February 1942 as 'a magnificent display of very bad strategy'.[183] Several Australian military historians have agreed with King's judgment. In 1965, Colonel E. G. Keogh concluded that the garrisoning of Ambon was not vital to Australia's defence

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181 AWM 54 541/1/4, Paper by the Chief of the General Staff on Future Employment of the AIF, 15 February 1942, para. 3. For detailed background on Sturdee's strategic decision-making at this time see Horner, *Crisis in Command*, pp. 41–50; *High Command*, pp. 155–62, and 'Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee: The Chief of the General Staff as Commander', in David Horner (ed.), *The Commanders: Australian Military Leadership in the Twentieth Century*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, pp. 147–57.

182 AWM 67 5/31, Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948, para. 8.

183 Quoted in Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*, p. 380.

and its communication links.[184] Gavin Long wrote that the deployment of the battalion groups on Ambon and Timor was 'strategically . . . quite irrational'.[185] Later historians—including John Robertson, John McCarthy, Joan Beaumont and Peter Henning—have accepted Long's view. They have described the defence of the northern islands variously as 'extremely dubious strategy', and as a military disaster caused by 'confused and ill-conceived strategy' and 'inadequate leadership at the highest military level, both in Australia and the ABDA command'.[186]

While there is much truth in the views of the above scholars, it is important to understand that the strategic end sought by Australia in 1941–42—fighting forward and keeping the enemy as far from home soil as possible—was not (as Long, Beaumont and Henning have suggested) irrational, confused or ill-conceived. To portray it so is merely a confession of perplexity, not a considered explanation of what occurred. As Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch have argued, military catastrophe is the most complex kind of disaster since 'it is one and the same time the easiest to recognise and the most difficult to explain'.[187]

In early 1942, it was not so much the Australian–ABDA strategic *end* of forward deployment that was flawed as

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184 Keogh, *South West Pacific*, pp. 118–19; 131.

185 Gavin Long, 'Review of *South West Pacific, 1941–45* by Colonel E. G. Keogh', *Australian Army Journal*, November 1965, No. 198, p. 46.

186 Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 219; Beaumont, *Gull Force*, pp. 42–3; Henning, *Doomed Battalion*, p. 117.

187 Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, The Free Press, New York, 1990, p. 228.

much as the operational *means* to execute it. In both Australian and Allied military planning, there was a fatal disconnection between the strategic end sought (the defence of forward operating bases) and the operational means available (the absence of joint and combined strike-forces, especially fighter aircraft). The nature of this strategic–operational dichotomy points to military failure being caused by a complex combination of factors.

It is not enough to blame failure simply on the mistakes of the ABDA Commander or the Australian Chiefs of Staff. Modern strategic decision-making is neither personalised nor homogenous. It is an organisational and fusionist process that involves, as Clausewitz put it, 'a relationship between phenomena': international diplomatic considerations, domestic political factors, strategic imperatives and military resources—and all of these issues were at play in the South-West Pacific during 1941–42.[188]

In explaining the Ambon debacle, then, a historian is faced by an interrelationship of events and deficiencies that, when taken together, amount to a systemic crisis in Australian strategic decision-making in the early weeks of the Pacific War. Two factors stand out. First, there was the sad legacy of military neglect and illusion that surrounded inter-war Australian defence policy. There was a disjunction between a narrow 1930s theory of naval strategy based on Singapore and the early-1940s reality of a broad operational need for mobile joint-forces to meet the Japanese threat. This disjunction between theory and reality

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188 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976, p. 141.

strained Australian military resources to their limit and plunged the armed forces into an organisational crisis.

Gull Force's lack of field artillery, anti-aircraft guns and automatic weapons—combined with the absence of air and naval power—were graphic examples of an Australian materiel and operational crisis. Yet at the same time the Australian Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet felt compelled to pursue a forward observation-line. Their aim was to try to create a strategic perimeter for early warning and to ward off the possibility of invasion. In mid-January 1942 the Chiefs noted that, despite Allied reverses from the Philippines to the Celebes and with Singapore gravely imperilled, Australia's 'immunity from invasion . . . depends on our ability to maintain our position in Malaya and the NEI'.[189] As David Horner observes, while political support for the Netherlands East Indies was a key factor in Australian strategic thinking in December 1941, 'the persuasive argument was for the maintenance of a "forward observation line"'.[190] It was this imperative that made small garrisons key components of the ill-fated strategy of 'no reinforcement-no withdrawal' with respect to the Dutch island bases.[191]

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189 AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Defence of Australia', 16 January 1942, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 3, para. 8.

190 Horner, *Crisis of Command,* p. 35.

191 It should be noted that, for a short period in January–February 1942, the policy of 'no reinforcement – no withdrawal' was also applied to areas of mainland Australia, notably Western Australia and northern Queensland. By March, this policy was superseded when the return of the 1st Australian Corps made two AIF divisions available for homeland defence. See Horner, *Crisis of Command*, pp. 39–40.

A second factor that was superimposed on Australia's operational weaknesses was the need to view defence in the Pacific from the perspective of coalition warfare. Australia was not alone in her desire to secure key positions in the Netherlands East Indies archipelago. It was a strategic outlook that was shared by British, Dutch and American planners. In a real sense, the creation of ABDACOM institutionalised the defence of the Netherlands East Indies. Thus, when Wavell created the Sumatra–Darwin–Timor–Singapore air base-line, Gull Force remained in position because the Dutch and the Americans in ABDACOM and the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington imposed the doctrine of 'maximum defence-in-depth' in an attempt to secure the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. This doctrine was not illogical, but it did rest on a gambler's throw, namely that the Allies could buy enough time to assemble sufficient American air reinforcements to blunt the Japanese advance. The gamble failed but, as Samuel Eliot Morison has pointed out:

> The Allies did well to fight for the Malay Barrier . . . They had a recent and horrible example of the moral disaster in too easy and complacent a capitulation—that of France. Another Vichy regime in the Southwest might have been too much for the Allies to bear.[192]

The currency of war with which the Allies sought to buy time was the foot soldier. Given this approach—which was followed by the Australian Chiefs of Staff, by Wavell and the ABDA staff and by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington—the operational appreciations of Roach and Wing Commander Scott as local commanders on Ambon amounted to only single pieces in a large and fluid strategic jigsaw. Roach's perspective was that of a capable field-

192 Morison, *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*, p. 380.

commander justly concerned at the fate of his men; Sturdee's perspective, on the other hand, was that of a higher strategist, a de facto commander-in-chief, concerned with the destiny of the nation at a time of extraordinary peril and against a background of domestic political hysteria.[193] From the peculiarities of their respective positions, both Roach and Sturdee were right in their assessments; however, in a collision with a higher commander over strategic policy, Roach could only lose.

The relationship between Sturdee and Roach was exacerbated by Australia's inadequate command and control arrangements in late 1941 and early 1942. As already noted, from December 1941, the island garrisons ceased to be answerable to Brigadier Lind or the GOC, 7th Military District, Major General Blake in Darwin. The battalion groups became detached formations under the direct control of Army Headquarters in distant Melbourne. This was an unsatisfactory situation—one that can be attributed to the confusion and urgency surrounding the task of restructuring the Australian command system to meet the needs of war in the Pacific.

There was little in the way of a streamlined command system in Australia during 1941. The problems faced are well illustrated by the appointment, in August 1941, of Lieutenant General Sir Iven Mackay as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Home Forces. Mackay's task was to try to coordinate the defensive plans of each of the various geographic commands in

193 Horner, 'Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee: The Chief of the General Staff as Commander', p. 149. See also David Horner, 'High Command—The Australian Experience', *Defence Force Journal*, September/October 1984, no. 48, pp. 15–16.

Australia.[194] In theory, the appointment of a GOC-in-C Home Forces should have relieved the heavy burden on Army Headquarters. In practice, this did not happen because the enormous strain on Australia's military personnel and resources prevented Mackay from establishing a functional headquarters. In effect 'the responsibility for the defence of Australia rested with the CGS'.[195]

It was against this background that Gull Force fell under the direct command of an overburdened CGS operating in an overworked and strained Army Headquarters in Melbourne. As the Ambon battalion group evolved from the status of a protective tactical formation into an important strategic factor in the calculations of Sturdee and his fellow Chiefs of Staff, the command and control apparatus available proved inadequate. In the context of the detached force on Ambon in 1941–42, the Australian Army sorely lacked a grand tactical or operational level of command to interpret strategic intent and planning. Consequently, there was little integration between the strategic and tactical levels of war.

The above problems of command organisation could only have contributed to the lack of understanding between Roach and Sturdee. The CGS was aware of conditions on Ambon but, unlike Roach, he had to consider a decision to withdraw from the island both in the context of political opinion in Australia and from the perspective of the policies of the nation's British, Dutch and American Allies. To all intents and purposes, the perspectives of Roach and

194 Horner, *Crisis of Command*, pp. 26; 39–41.

195 *Ibid.*, p. 25. Mackay's headquarters was not established until late December 1941.

Sturdee were so diametrically opposed that they could almost have been speaking different languages. In essence, and to paraphrase John Keegan, both men wore different 'masks of command'.[196]

Roach was dismissed from field command because he could not accept what was, to him, the irrational logic of the policy of 'no withdrawal – no reinforcement'; Scott was appointed to command because he accepted, uncritically, the imperatives behind the policy. That Roach's operational appreciation of the position on Ambon was correct became irrelevant—a casualty of higher strategy and coalition policy.

The RAAF commander on Ambon, Wing Commander Scott, succeeded in persuading Brett to authorise the withdrawal of RAAF aircraft and personnel from Ambon in late January 1942. It is important to note, however, that such an option of withdrawal was never open to Gull Force. The withdrawal of air units was part of the Allied belief that air forces could be relocated successfully. In relation to ground forces, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered that 'all men of fighting units for whom there are arms must continue to fight'.[197] The aim was to hold up the enemy for as long as possible and buy time for the arrival of air reinforcements. Even after the fall of Singapore, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered that Java should be

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196 See John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, Penguin, London, 1987, pp. 10–11.

197 Combined Chiefs of Staff to Wavell, 22 February 1942, cited in Connell, *Wavell*, p. 196.

defended 'with the utmost resolution by all combatant troops in the island . . . *Every day gained is of importance'*.[198]

Given the interplay of these factors and the shared strategic views of the Allies, it is not surprising that Sturdee never regretted attempting to hold the Japanese as far from Australian soil as possible. To Sturdee the gamble was worth the price. The loss of the island garrisons on Rabaul, Ambon and Timor were unfortunate but necessary sacrifices at a time of grave national peril and after years of warning from the Australian General Staff that the Singapore strategy would fail the nation in its hour of need. Sturdee has been described as 'a realist in the highest degree' and as 'the rock on which the army, and indeed the [Australian] government, rested during the weeks of panic in early 1942'.[199] In 1955, Sturdee justified his actions during the crisis period of 1941–42 with characteristic frankness:

> I realised at the time [in 1941–42] that these forces [on Rabaul, Timor and Ambon] would be swallowed up . . . but these garrisons were the smallest self-contained units then in existence. My only regret now looking back was that we didn't have more knowledge of the value of Independent Companies, at that time they were only in the hatching stage and their value unknown. I am now certain that they would have been the answer, and at no time did I consider that additional troops and arms should be sent to these potentially beleaguered garrisons, as it would only put more [men] in the [prisoner-of-war] bag.[200]

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198 Combined Chiefs of Staff to Wavell, 21 February 1942, cited in Connell, *Wavell*, p. 193. Emphasis added.

199 Lieutenant General Sir Sydney Rowell, 'General Sturdee and the Australian Army', *Australian Army Journal*, August 1966, no. 207, p. 5; Horner, 'Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee: The Chief of General Staff as Commander', p. 158.

200 AWM 67 3/384, Sturdee to Gavin Long, 8 February 1955.

Both Sturdee and Rowell believed that their actions in trying to defend the northern archipelago in early 1942 were 'in accordance with the dictates of sound strategy'.[201] There can be no doubt that, in the early weeks of the Pacific War, the Australian Chiefs of Staff were united in their belief that Ambon and Timor possessed 'a high strategic importance' in preventing the Japanese from launching attacks on Australia's sea communications and territory.[202]

As seen from the above discussion, there is a lively historiographical controversy over the merits of the strategy followed. However, it is worth noting that when, in mid-February, Sturdee recommended an end to the strategy of the forward line, he employed many of the arguments used earlier by Roach. The difference was that the CGS was now armed with clear evidence from the disasters on Rabaul and Ambon and from the unmistakable crumbling of the Allied position at Singapore that the strategy formulated between March and December 1941 had collapsed. The attempt to hold the island line had failed; American aircraft reinforcements were losing the race to save the forward positions; and ABDACOM in Bandung had failed to turn the tide against Japan.

The dictates of higher strategy have a cold and unrelenting logic that is impervious to sentiment. Nowhere in Australian military history is this better demonstrated than

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201 AWM 67 5/31, Sturdee and Rowell, 'Comments on US War History', 5 February 1948, para. 8.

202 See, for example, AWM 54 422/7/8, 'Australian–Canadian Cooperation in the Pacific—Appreciation of Defence of Australia and Adjacent Areas', 29 January 1942, Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 4, para. 5.

in the period between December 1941 and February 1942. At this time, Sturdee and his colleagues were faced with critical decisions in the face of a swift and unrelenting tide of Japanese success—a success that seemed to herald an imminent invasion of Australia.[203] Under these circumstances, that the Chiefs of Staff sought, at high cost, to keep the Japanese military juggernaut as far as possible from Australian soil should be no great surprise. The Chiefs of Staff recommended a change of strategy only when there was irrefutable evidence of military failure to place before the War Cabinet. Such a stance was consistent with both the turbulent political climate in Australia and the realities of coalition warfare that prevailed in early 1942.

The gallantry and grief of Gull Force can thus be characterised in two ways. It is Roach's 'purposeless sacrifice'—a waste of good men and scarce materiel. Yet it is also a tropical Thermopylae of 'a gallant stand', as Frank Forde, the Minister for the Army, characterised Gull Force's role—a heroic sacrifice that, for all its shortcomings and tragic aftermath, held up the enemy and helped create the strategic conditions for a great Allied counteroffensive from Australian soil.[204] If there is a villain in the tragedy of Ambon in 1942, it is a 'ghost in the machine' that can be found in the systemic crisis of Australian defence in 1941–42—a crisis caused by twenty years of neglect of defence by a succession of governments and by the electorate they served.

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203 See Horner, 'Lieutenant General Sir Vernon Sturdee: The Chief of the General Staff as Commander', pp. 147–57.

204 Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 185, 3 October 1945, p. 6344.

Learning from Failure: Lessons from Ambon for Australian Strategy in the 21st Century

What can be learnt from the case of Ambon for contemporary Australian strategy? Scholars are rightly cautious about the possibility of history yielding accurate lessons for the present and the future. Their caution is based on the fact that it is a notoriously difficult task to determine which historical lessons are the right ones. The dangers of distortion and loss of context are constant. Nonetheless, despite these difficulties, military history remains the main source of raw material for pondering difficult questions of contemporary strategy. As leading Australian naval historian John Reeve has noted, history provides the only real evidence against which we can test modern strategic concepts. He observes, 'history has advantages in strategic discussion: it is real, it is unclassified, and we know who won'.[205]

The history of Australian strategic decision-making in 1941–42 is instructive in four areas of contemporary security. First, the events on and surrounding Ambon in 1941–42 suggest that, in terms of regional security, the defence of Australia begins in the northern archipelagos, and this means that the ADF requires a highly developed maritime concept of strategy. Second, the experience of Ambon demonstrates that the successful execution of a maritime concept of strategy by Australia requires a flexible balance between sea, air and land forces, as the essence of operations in littoral conditions is joint warfare.

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[205] John Reeve, 'How Not to Defend the Inner Arc: The Lessons of Japanese Defeat', *The Navy: The Magazine of the Navy League of Australia*, July–September 2000, vol. 62, no. 3, p. 3.

Third, unlike Gull Force in Ambon in 1942, the ADF needs to ensure that its command and control arrangements facilitate the effective interaction of strategy, operations and tactics. Fourth, the disaster on Ambon suggests that Australia requires a military force-structure that emphasises the primacy of coalition warfare in the Asia-Pacific region. Such a force structure must, however, be focused and flexible enough to provide a capability for independent regional operations.

The Necessity for an Australian Maritime Concept of Strategy

At the end of World War II, most Australian politicians and military leaders accepted that the security of the island chains to the north was fundamental to the security of Australia. In June 1946, the veteran politician Sir Earle Page summed up a postwar consensus when he described the arc of islands to the north running from Sumatra to the Solomons as being 'the real shield of Australia'.[206]

A useful document in understanding some of Australia's key maritime needs is the February 1946 Chiefs of Staff Appreciation of the Strategical Position of Australia.[207] Although this document is situated in the global context of British Commonwealth defence, it contains an interesting distillation of Australia's regional strategic requirements. The 1946 appreciation is important because it was written at a time when there was no great-power threat in the Pacific, before the onset of the Cold War and immediately

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206 Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol. 185, 27 June 1946, p. 1954.

207 AA CRS A5954/69 (Papers of F. G. Shedden), Item 1645/9, 'An Appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff of the Strategical Position of Australia', February 1946, para. 16, p. 8.

after a successful struggle by Australia to defeat aggression in the region—a rare combination of circumstances.[208] The Chifley Government asked the Chiefs of Staff 'to examine the matter (of Australia's post-war defence forces) from the strategical aspect of a defence problem and to tender their advice of the strength and organisation of the Forces'.[209] The Chiefs' appreciation, drawn up by three veteran strategists—Sturdee, Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton and Air Marshal George Jones—sought to avoid the weaknesses of defence planning in the 1930s, as exposed in the early weeks of the Pacific War in 1941–42.[210]

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208 In the 1946 appreciation the Soviet Union was acknowledged as 'a potential enemy of the future' whose policies were not reassuring, *ibid*., paras 41–5, p. 13. For a comparative perspective see Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, Special Hansard Report, Canberra, April 1986.

209 *Key Elements in the Triennial Reviews of Strategic Guidance since 1945*, p. 3.

210 For discussions of Australian postwar defence planning and the impact of the Cold War see Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53, Volume 1: Strategy and Diplomacy*, The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, chap. 2; Peter Edwards, *Crises and Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948–1965*, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, Sydney, 1992, chaps 1 and 4; David Lee, 'Britain and Australia's Defence Policy, 1946–1949', *War & Society*, May 1995, XIII, i, pp. 61–80; and *Search For Security: The Political Economy of Australia's Postwar Foreign and Defence Policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, chap. 3. See also David Horner, *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, chaps 11–13.

Several of the Chiefs' recommendations embodied strategic thinking that was both maritime and coalition-oriented in conception. For instance, they pointed out that a network of advanced air-bases was required in the Asia-Pacific area. These bases needed to be garrisoned by the Army if the RAAF and RAN were to function effectively in the defence of Australia.[211] The appreciation viewed Port Moresby, Nadzab, the Admiralties, Rabaul and the Solomons as essential air-bases that should be maintained by Australia.[212] New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and the Netherlands East Indies were also regarded as being critical to Australia's security.[213] The Chiefs noted that good relations with the Netherlands East Indies were essential since the archipelago afforded key strategic base and communications facilities to a potential enemy and conferred 'a jumping-off place for an attack on the Australian mainland'.[214]

Over half a century later, the 1946 appreciation is still relevant as Australia seeks to refine a maritime concept of strategy that matches the requirements of 21st-century security. The ADF needs to be able to use forward operating-bases for its air and sea assets in the northern archipelagos, and these bases will need to be protected by mobile and well-equipped land forces. The disaster on Ambon in 1942 can be partly attributed to the fact that the navalist orientation of the Singapore strategy neglected to consider the possibility of Australian air and ground forces

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211 'An Appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff of the Strategical Position of Australia', February 1946, paras 68–70, p. 18; para. 89, p. 19.

212 *Ibid*., para. 86, p. 19.

213 *Ibid*., paras 98–9, p. 23.

214 *Ibid*., paras 101–3, p. 23.

being deployed to defend forward bases. It is significant that a navalist orientation—albeit with an aerospace component—is perhaps the most significant feature of Australia's present maritime concept of strategy, as articulated in ASP 97. Because of this weakness, the 1997 review is flawed as an analysis of maritime security requirements. The document upholds the narrow primacy of defending the sea–air gap between Australia and the northern archipelagos rather than the sea–land–air gap that reflects the reality of a littoral battlespace.[215]

ASP 97 fails as a convincing exposition of maritime strategy because it does not integrate land forces with sea and air assets.[216] It is true that the 1997 review mentions the need for a brigade group and for amphibious lift for offshore operations. However, the review defines the 'crucial role' of land forces in terms that the Australian General Staff would have recognised in 1937, namely 'protecting command, communications and intelligence facilities and the air fields and naval bases in northern Australia . . . [along with a] capability to react to incursions on to Australian territory'.[217]

The danger of such an approach is clearly demonstrated by the disaster that befell Gull Force on Ambon in 1941–42. It is significant that in June 1947, when outlining the direction of Australia's postwar defence policy, the Minister for Defence John Dedman was careful to avoid succumbing to

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215 Michael Evans, *The Role of the Australian Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, pp. 25–8.

216 It is useful to compare ASP 97 with the UK Ministry of Defence's *BR 1806: British Maritime Doctrine*, 2nd edn, The Stationery Office, London, 1999.

217 *Australia's Strategic Policy*, p. 44.

a navalist orientation in discussing maritime strategy. While Dedman recognised the critical importance of sea power, he stated, 'I am not using sea power in any narrow sense, and excluding the part played by land and air forces'.[218] He went on to state:

> While control of sea communications and air superiority is an essential foundation, comprehensive land operations, in which land and air forces must be combined against a resolute and well-armed enemy, are the means by which victory is ultimately won.[219]

Over fifty years on, Australian planners would do well to heed Dedman's joint approach to maritime strategy. Contemporary policy makers need to recognise therefore that ASP 97 represents only the first step in a long march to develop a broader and more integrated approach to an Australian maritime strategy.

Executing a Maritime Concept of Strategy: Balancing Concepts, Capabilities and Forces

The Ambon tragedy also points to Australia's need, when operating in the northern archipelagos, to possess balanced sea, air and land forces. On Ambon, Gull Force lacked the means for operational manoeuvre because Australia was incapable of employing joint forces for maritime warfare. ASP 97 concentrates largely on the naval and air requirements of maritime operations in the sea–air gap. These assets are essential, but a credible maritime strategy needs to take into account the requirement for land forces securing forward air operating-bases—particularly given the fact that Australia lacks aircraft carriers. What needs to

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218 Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol. 192, 4 June 1947, p. 3328.

219 *Ibid*., p. 3340.

be done in the future is to define an ADF force structure for the execution of a joint maritime strategy.

In the 21st century, the ADF needs to develop a maritime concept of strategy that integrates three areas: manoeuvre operations in a littoral environment; amphibious capability; and the integration of sea control with a broader appreciation of the use of naval and air power in maritime strategy. Since 1998 the Australian Army has carried out work on a littoral or archipelagic concept of operations. It is important to note that the author's interpretation of the Army's work does not reflect any official position.

The Army's littoral-archipelagic concept has been the focus of preparedness and force design. However, to be effective, littoral manoeuvre must be more than single service in outlook; it needs to become part of a wider ADF initiative.[220] The Army's littoral manoeuvre concept is fixed on the area of the 'inner arc'—that area that includes Ambon and Timor—which the Japanese dominated with aerial and combined-arms warfare in 1942. The Army defines littoral manoeuvre 'as integrated sea–land–air operations involving forced entry from the sea and air undertaken in the littoral region'.[221] For maximum effectiveness, these operations require joint capabilities for both warfighting and military-support operations. To execute littoral manoeuvre, Australia needs to develop a medium-weight Army with strategic deployability, lethal

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220 Australian Army, Future Land Warfare Branch, 'Concept for Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment' (Draft dated 16 December 1999).

221 *Ibid*., p. 2.

firepower, adequate protection, high mobility and adequate air–sea support.[222]

Like the defence of Ambon in 1941–42, the Army's littoral manoeuvre concept postulates that the ADF should develop a capability to conduct inner-arc operations to seize, deny or protect a forward operating-base.[223] Unlike Ambon in 1941–42, the capability in 1999–2000 for littoral manoeuvre is seen as requiring joint forces using strike warfare, operational shock and the notion of cyber manoeuvre (information operations and electronic warfare) to paralyse enemy cohesion.[224] Dividing and fixing strikes are designed to shape the operational environment, while objective strikes are designed to destroy enemy assets.[225] Such operations may employ formations ranging from special force detachments to a brigade group. The Army believes that, 'if the operational requirement is to seize a forward operating base, it will be necessary to overcome defenders and then prepare the base for defence. This would be a task for a *combined arms brigade*'.[226] Much of the littoral manoeuvre concept is built around information-age advances that are regarded as facilitating the double-edged sword of precision manoeuvre and precision firepower.[227]

As was demonstrated by Australian military failure on Ambon in 1942, successful military action on forward bases requires carefully equipped, structured and integrated

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222 *Ibid*., pp. 1–3.
223 *Ibid*., p. 4.
224 *Ibid*., p. 11. See also pp. 5–7.
225 *Ibid*., pp. 9–11.
226 *Ibid*., p. 11. Emphasis added.
227 *Ibid*., p. 12.

capabilities. For this reason, the Army's archipelagic operational concept needs to be much more closely aligned with developments in ADF amphibious capability.[228] While the Army's archipelagic concept of operations suggests that inner-arc military activity may conceivably require the projection of a combined-arms brigade, the ADF remains short of amphibious and other strategic-lift assets. ADF planners view a short-warning battalion group of 1250 personnel as the maximum force that can be projected into the northern islands for inner-arc operations in the foreseeable future.[229] A dedicated amphibious helicopter is also required as a priority capability because the present rotary-wing assets, the Navy's Sea King helicopters, are not suitable for air-mobile operations, while the Army's Blackhawk helicopters are not marinised.[230]

In addition to harmonising littoral manoeuvre and amphibious concepts and capabilities, the ADF needs to come to grips with the broader role of naval operations in the 21st century. While sea control remains an essential feature of maritime operations (as demonstrated by the ADF's recent experience in East Timor), its purpose has undergone considerable change since the end of the Cold War. Western navies are in the midst of a transition from oceanic to littoral warfare, where the emphasis will be on

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228 Australian Defence Force, Headquarters Australian Theatre, 'ADF Amphibious Capability—Concept for Operations', Draft as at 8 February 1999.

229 *Ibid*., p. 4.

230 *Ibid*., pp. 5–6. See also Michael Evans, 'Unarmed Prophets: Amphibious Warfare in Australian Military Thought', *Journal of the Australian Naval Institute*, January/March 1999, XXV, i, pp. 10–19.

joint power-projection from the sea to the land.[231] In the information age, the communications revolution has changed the relationships between force, space and time.

The factors of battlespace awareness; advanced command, control, communications, computing and intelligence (C4I); and precision force represent the three new technological factors that are transforming maritime strategy in the early 21st century. These three factors have created conditions in which discriminate targeting can be used over reduced space in increased time.[232] The Army's ideas about cyber manoeuvre in archipelagic operations need to be related to a land–sea interface, in which the concept of increased time over reduced space is emphasised in an integrated and joint campaign.

The maritime strategist, Rear Admiral Raja Menon, has argued that the main armament of the 21st-century warship will be the land-attack missile—a weapons system that has the potential to offset many of the aviation disadvantages in medium, non-carrier navies such as the RAN.[233] Precision ordnance also confers improved air-defence and an enhanced role in fires delivered by special forces, thus improving the conditions for rapid manoeuvre-warfare.[234] To take advantage of these new developments, the ADF needs an approach to force planning that maximises

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231 For an analysis see Colin S. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1994, chap. 4 and Rear Admiral Raja Menon, *Maritime Strategy and Continental Wars*, Frank Cass, London, 1998, chaps 7–8.

232 Menon, *Maritime Strategy*, pp. 157–63.

233 *Ibid*., pp. 194–5.

234 *Ibid*., p. 201.

capabilities over platforms—including helicopters, attack missiles, special forces and conventional aircraft—while remaining cost-effective. The ADF needs more of a focus on concepts and force development rather than capital investment.

By concentrating overwhelmingly on the narrow concept of sea-control in the sea–air gap, ASP 97 did not address these dramatic and broader changes in seaborne warfare. However, there is evidence that some planners in the RAN have recognised the end of the age of Cold War navalism and the need for a wider understanding of the use of sea power. As Commodore Timothy Cox, the former RAN Director General Maritime Development, put it in February 2000, 'the shift to land attack is *the* shift [in naval warfare] of the 21st century'.[235] Such a shift requires the RAN to confront the implications of littoral warfare for naval force-structure. Recently, the RAN's Sea Power Centre commenced important work on a comprehensive maritime doctrine that seeks to integrate a distinct Australian approach to sea-control with the idea of an information-age battlespace. The aim appears to be to develop warfighting approaches that increase the RAN's ability to influence events on land directly. These trends suggest that there is a growing belief inside the RAN that manoeuvre in Australia's maritime environment represents a sea–air–land concept that will be fundamental in many future operations.[236]

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235 Commodore Timothy Cox, RAN, 'An Australian View of Surface Warfare'. Paper presented to the Maritime Warfare in the 21st Century: The Medium and Small Navy Perspective Conference, Sydney, 2 February 2000. Notes taken by author.

236 This assessment is based on the author's attendance at the Maritime Warfare 21 Conference in Sydney in February 2000,

In terms of crucial area of air requirements, the RAAF must consider the use of forward bases in any operations in the islands to the north of Australia. It is impossible to study the case of Ambon and not come away with a firm conviction that air power in general, and fighter aircraft in particular, were essential to Australia's defence of the northern archipelagos in 1942. In this respect, little has changed over sixty years. A recent examination of land-based maritime air-capabilities published by the RAAF's Air Power Studies Centre has pointed to the importance of air bases in the inner arc. [237] The study points out that, in the 21st century, areas such as Timor, the Cocos and Christmas islands, Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya represent key 'strategic points', which the ADF must control by both land and air during a crisis if it is to secure the defence of the Australian mainland.[238] The RAAF emphasis on forward air-bases echoes several of the recommendations in the 1946 Chiefs of Staff appreciation.

The Need for Effective Command and Control in Maritime Operations

The concepts of littoral manoeuvre and amphibious warfare, along with the special roles of naval and air power in maritime conflict, need to become integrated at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. Australia must, at all costs, avoid the command and control confusion of Ambon in 1942 if the nation's military

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and on discussions with various RAN officers at the Sea Power Centre.

237 Wing Commander Michael S. Maher, *The Role of Australian Land-Based Air Power in a Maritime Strategy*, Paper No. 75, Air Power Studies Centre, Canberra, June 1999.

238 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

leadership is to succeed in blending operational means with strategic ends.

The ADF of the 21st century must possess a clearly defined and balanced chain of operational command that integrates the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. During the defence of Ambon, the Australian Chiefs of Staff lacked a proper operational headquarters organisation. In theory, ABDACOM should have fulfilled this role in January 1942. In practice, a lack of resources and the speed of the Japanese advance overwhelmed Wavell's headquarters. In dealing with multiple Japanese thrusts across the Pacific between December 1941 and March 1942, Australia and its Allies functioned at the strategic and tactical levels of war, but not at the 'grand tactical' or operational level of war.[239]

The establishment of Headquarters Australian Theatre (HQAST) in early 1997 provided Australia with an operational-level theatre headquarters in the ADF for the first time.[240] Under this system, the Maritime, Land, Air and Special Operations Commanders are all components under Commander Australian Theatre (COMAST).[241] It is

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239 The operational level of war may be defined as the link between strategy and tactics; it governs the way operations are designed to meet strategic ends and the way campaigns are conducted. See Clayton R. Newell, *The Framework of Operational Warfare*, Routledge, London, 1991, chap. 2.

240 Department of Defence, 'Establishment of Headquarters Australian Theatre', Circular Memorandum No. 21/97, 7 April 1997, pp. 1–2; Headquarters Australian Theatre, *Decisive Manoeuvre: Australian Warfighting Concepts to Guide Campaign Planning*, interim edn, Defence Publishing and Visual Communications, Canberra, 1998.

241 *Ibid.*

important that future Australian defence-planners appreciate the importance of a joint operational-level theatre headquarters in dealing with simultaneous crises, such as those that occurred on Rabaul, Ambon and Timor in
1941–42.

In a prolonged, and possibly dispersed, crisis in the Indonesian archipelago or the Solomons, neither direct command from the ADF's strategic headquarters in Canberra nor the tactical use of the Deployable Joint Force Headquarters (DJFHQ) may be sufficient. While the DJFHQ may occasionally function at the operational level—as was the case between September 1999 and February 2000 when it formed the basis for the INTERFET united headquarters in East Timor—the DJFHQ is essentially a tactical-level organisation.[242] It is important to note that, in some respects, Operation *Warden* in East Timor was unique, as it took place in a relatively small and confined geographical area. In a geographically dispersed crisis, only HQAST has the capacity to control simultaneous operations in separate locations. In addition, unlike the predominantly land-based DJFHQ, HQAST contains embedded joint and single-Service staff that are vital to the ADF in mounting sustained and effective joint and combined operations.

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[242] For offshore operations, the DJFHQ may function at the operational level, but it remains predominantly a tactical-level headquarters. The DFJHQ was formed during the 1990s from a reconstituted Headquarters 1st Division and from Commodore Flotillas. See Michael Evans, *Forward from the Past: The Development of Australian Army Doctrine, 1972–Present*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Study Paper No. 301, Duntroon, ACT, July 1999, pp. 39–40.

COMAST thus offers the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF) freedom to concentrate on politico-strategic requirements, without the operational distractions that bedevilled the Australian Chiefs of Staff in 1941 and early 1942. HQAST should coordinate its effort using subordinate headquarters such as the DFJHQ and Headquarters Northern Command (HQNORCOM) in Darwin. In short, an ADF operational-level theatre headquarters remains the most suitable organisation to concentrate on campaign planning to fulfil strategic ends.

The Primacy of Coalition Operations in Regional Security

There are over 13 000 islands stretching for over 5000 kilometres through the Indonesian archipelago and, as was the case in 1941–42, operating in these islands is an international activity. In 1941 Australia, despite its materiel inadequacies and chronic unpreparedness for war in the Pacific, cooperated with the Dutch, British and Americans, and garrisoned Ambon to defend the Malay Barrier. While Australia's political leadership viewed the integrity of the inner arc as a critical military objective in securing the nation, its defence was seen essentially in terms of a coalition effort. The events surrounding Ambon in 1941–42, and more recently East Timor in 1999–2000, suggest that it is unlikely that Australia would seek to conduct operations in the inner arc without allies. Consequently, the ADF's force structure should be determined mainly on the grounds of the primacy of coalition operations in the northern archipelagos.

In their 1946 appreciation, which was firmly situated in a British Commonwealth and international context, the Chiefs of Staff called the choice between an independent defence capability and coalition operations a choice

between 'isolation and co-operation'.[243] In the wake of Australia's experience on Ambon and the other northern islands from 1941 to 1945, the Chiefs stated that 'arrangements for Regional Security, to be effective, must be made in relation to a wider plan and not solely on local considerations'.[244] They warned that 'the concept of strategical isolation is irreconcilable with the realities of modern war'.[245] The only conflict Australia was likely to face would be with a minor power and, even then, the nation would have the assistance of the United Nations and major Allies.[246]

The Chiefs believed that Australia's defence was best secured in an international and coalition context rather than upon a capability for continental or independent operations. Provided there was cooperation with the United Nations, the British Commonwealth and the United States, the issue of 'local [continental] defence' was unlikely to arise. However, if this situation did occur, it would represent a last resort, involving the severance of Australia's overseas communications and measures to stimulate national economic self-sufficiency. The Chiefs were careful to warn that under such dire circumstances 'a scheme of local defence based upon the islands to the north of Australia would dissipate our limited resources and invite defeat in detail'. If Australia was faced with the problem of continental defence, a 'complete withdrawal to the mainland [might] be necessary'.[247]

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243 'An Appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff of the Strategical Position of Australia', February 1946, para. 1, p. 6.

244 *Ibid.*, para. 3, p. 6.

245 *Ibid.*, para. 6, p. 6.

246 *Ibid.*, para. 16, p. 8.

247 *Ibid.*, paras 111–12, p. 24.

The Chiefs went on to recommend a cooperative concept of defence, in which:

> The primary considerations in the organisation of the armed forces should therefore be the provision of a balanced Task Force of the three Services . . . Further, in order that Australia should be able promptly to undertake commitments commensurate with her status, as large a proportion of the Forces as is economically possible should be permanent forces.[248]

The 1946 appreciation argued that developing Australia's military forces solely on the basis of the primacy of home defence was undesirable, as it would 'necessitate reorganisation and inevitable dislocation in the case of an emergency requiring overseas operations'.[249] Australia's peacetime forces were to be organised for upholding international security in conjunction with the nation's Allies. The RAN was to become a mobile task-force consisting of aircraft carriers, escorts and amphibious craft, while the RAAF was to include units for long-range missions, transportation and the protection of bases and focal areas.[250]

Although the Chiefs considered that 'reliance should be placed mainly on the Navy and the Air [Force] for the security of our operational bases in the Pacific and Indian Ocean areas', they recommended that 'Army Forces are required in co-operation with the other Services for offensive and defensive roles'.[251] Army garrison forces were needed for the internal security of offshore bases and to counter minor enemy raiding forces. The Chiefs thus

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248 *Ibid*., para. 110, p. 24.
249 *Ibid*., para. 108, p. 24.
250 *Ibid*., paras 126–8, p. 27.
251 *Ibid*., para. 65, p. 16, and para. 70, p. 18.

recommended that the Army's structure be designed with adaptability in mind—for conventional (normal terrain), amphibious and jungle warfare operations.[252]

Over half a century later, ASP 97, surveying a fluid post–Cold War security environment, came to a similar conclusion to the pre–Cold War 1946 appreciation about the primacy of contemporary international conditions in defence calculations. The 1997 review stated that ADF operations were 'more likely to flow from a global or regional security situation than from any direct attack on Australia'.[253] However, the document did not take the logical step of outlining the changes that might be needed in force structure to meet such conditions. Instead, ASP 97 continued the trend in Australian strategy since the end of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s of determining a core force-structure largely for independent operations based on the continental defence of Australia.[254] Under a maritime concept of strategy based on a capability for operations in the northern islands, this focus needs to change. Coalition operations in the inner arc—whether warfighting or military support in nature—need to dominate future ADF force planning.

Historically, Australian strategic planning has always reflected tensions between two schools of thought: the *narrow* (meaning a primarily national and independent

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252 *Ibid.*, para. 70, p. 18, and para. 127, p. 27. The June 1947 Ministerial Statement on Post-War Defence Policy laid down plans for Australian defence forces based on a balance between Navy, Air Force and Army. See Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol. 192, 4 June 1947, pp. 3335–46.

253 *Australia's Strategic Policy*, p. 39.

254 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

defence-policy) and the *broad* (meaning a primarily international and coalition defence-policy).[255] Yet, in terms of focusing on the defence of Australia in the immediate area of the inner arc, the relationship between independent and coalition operations should not be seen as being mutually exclusive. If the northern inner-arc is to be the main focus of ADF preparedness and force-structure planning—as it should be—then there is a natural linkage, an osmosis, between defending Australia's regional interests (DRI) and defeating attacks against Australia (DAA).[256] The former facilitates the latter by adding the strategic depth of the northern archipelagos as a protective glacis. In order to maximise the potential benefit of the strategic duality between DRI and DAA tasks, Australia must possess a balanced and joint defence-force in the 21st century.

The Defence of Australia strategy that prevailed from 1987 to 1997, like the Singapore strategy before it, was flawed because it tended to drive one major element of maritime operations—land force development—into the *cul-de-sac* of continental defence.[257] When a successor strategy, in the form of ASP 97, attempted to outline a maritime concept of defence, it was compelled to use largely the same force-structure imperatives. The result was a strategy–force mismatch in which air–naval forces were not complemented by mobile land-forces. This mismatch is a major impediment to Australia

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255 See Michael Evans, 'From Defence to Security: Continuity and Change in Australian Strategic Planning in the Twentieth Century', in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *Serving Vital Interests: Australia's Strategic Planning in Peace and War*, University of New South Wales, Canberra, 1996, pp. 116–40.

256 This terminology is drawn from *Australia's Strategic Policy*, p. 29.

257 Evans, 'From Defence to Security: Continuity and Change in Australian Strategic Planning in the 20th Century', pp. 116–40.

developing a credible maritime concept of strategy that embraces joint forces.[258]

A future White Paper needs to synchronise those vital air, sea and land elements of the ADF's force structure that will support Australia's maritime concept of strategy in the early 21st century. A new strategic review needs to emphasise the fundamental need for a balanced ADF with an array of joint capabilities. Such a force structure should be designed largely for coalition operations in the inner arc—bearing in mind that, because this area is vital to the defence of continental Australia, such a structure will enhance the ADF's ability to conduct independent operations in the Asia-Pacific region.

CONCLUSION

In September 1919, Prime Minister Billy Hughes told Parliament, 'in order that Australia shall be safe, it is necessary that the great rampart of islands stretching around the north-east of Australia should be held by us or by some Power in whom we have absolute confidence'.[259]

The truth of these words is enduring. In 1941–42, when 'the great rampart of islands' was threatened by Japanese imperialism, Australia sought to defend them in conjunction with its Dutch, British and American allies. As seen through the lens of the Ambon tragedy, the strategy of the forward observation-line failed, with Australia forced to revert to continental defence in March 1942. Yet it is important to grasp that holding the forward line was always the strategy of natural choice for Australian decision-makers—a strategy that failed

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258 See Evans, *The Role of the Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, pp. 25–36.

259 Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol. LXXXIX, 10 September 1919, p. 12173.

in 1941–42 due largely to a lack of balanced operational means. As David Horner, the leading historian of Australian higher strategy in World War II, has observed of the period December 1941 to March 1942, 'the policy of continental defence, rather than forward defence, became a reality only after the complete failure of the latter'.[260]

In the early postwar era, Australia's Minister for External Affairs Percy Spender reaffirmed Hughes' doctrine of archipelagic security by stating in March 1950:

> Australia has a duty to itself which must not be neglected. This is the duty of ensuring by every means open to us that, in the island areas immediately adjacent to Australia, in whatever direction they lie, nothing takes place that can in any way offer a threat to Australian security, either in the short term or the long term. Those islands are, as experience has shown, our last ring of defence against aggression, and Australia must be vitally concerned with whatever changes take place in them.[261]

Geography is a strategic constant that no nation can evade. In the 21st century, Hughes' 'great rampart of islands' and Spender's 'ring of defence' in the northern archipelagos will continue to represent key points in the security of the Australian mainland. In terms of its immediate region of interest, and insofar as Australia can ever be said to possess a 'natural strategy', it resides in the ability to operate in the maritime environment of the northern island-chain.

The Ambon tragedy demonstrates the complexity of operating in a littoral environment. The need is for a subtle strategy that takes into account the relationship between different levels of command; between political ends and operational means; and

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260 Horner, *Crisis in Command*, p. 37.

261 Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, vol. 206, 9 March 1950, pp. 632–3.

between international factors and domestic politics. The most pressing requirement for Australian defence in the early 21st century is to broaden and refine a maritime concept of strategy that can serve these needs. In the early 2000s, as in the early 1930s, critical decisions on strategic guidance, force structure, platform modernisation and capability acquisition will determine the effectiveness of Australian strategy well into the second decade of the 21st century.

An effective Australian maritime strategy needs to be properly balanced and joint, and should seek a workable and affordable linkage between coalition and independent military operations in the area of the inner arc. Without these elements, Australia risks, at best, damage to her vital interests in the region and, at worst, a repetition of the Ambon disaster of 1942. At all costs, Australia must seek to avoid the verdict of John Curtin on the military reverses suffered in early 1942: 'we did lose a Division once—the 8th Division. It was lost because too little came too late. It is scattered now throughout the prison camps of Japan'.[262]

[262] AWM 54 573/6/10B, Roach to Land Headquarters, Melbourne, 22 November 1943, citing a radio broadcast by Curtin on 3 November 1943.

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