

Notes on the Defence of Australian Trade Routes, August 1909

Commander JT Richardson, CNF

If we are going to defend our sea-lines of communication to the rest of the world, we have got to make sure that we have got the naval capability to underpin that. And Australia therefore must have necessary maritime power in the future in order to give that effect.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, 2008¹

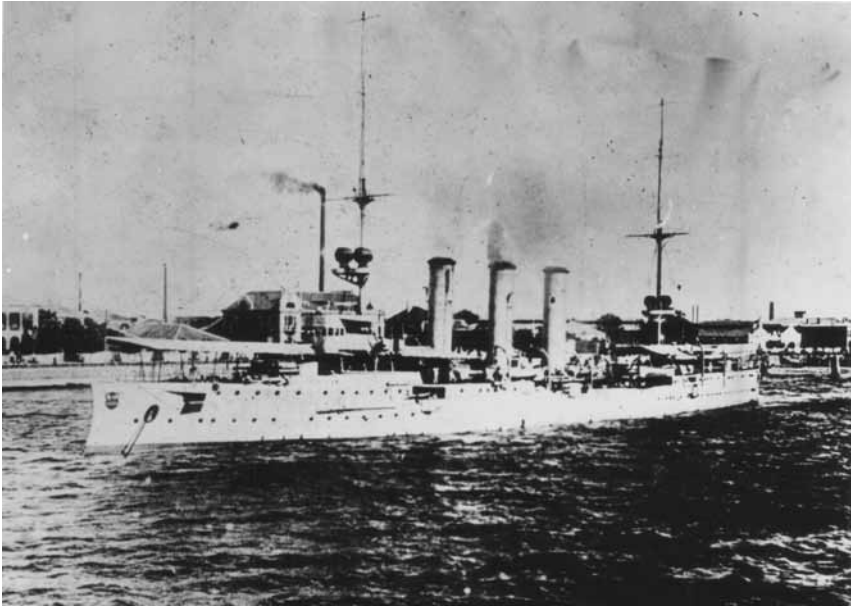
Background

Protection of merchant shipping has been a fundamental task for all navies, including the Australian Navy, for centuries. Maritime communications have been and remain essential not just for the movement of raw materials and trade goods, but for the very stability of each nation's economy, standard of living and political structure. Without efficient maritime communications a nation has difficulties engaging with others in the global system, and many isolated nations become poor, insecure and unstable. Hence it should not be too surprising to find that shortly after Federation, Australian leaders were discussing the importance of protecting merchant shipping and defending maritime trade routes.

A heated debate followed the Report of the Committee of Imperial Defence in May 1906 which assumed that an attack on Australia by raiders could be met by adequate harbour defences and countered by a British fleet sent in pursuit. This was not acceptable to many Australian politicians and naval authorities who believed that harbour defences were of little value against modern naval attack, and that in fact local naval forces were necessary to protect trade along the coast and in adjacent waters. The debate over whether the Australian Navy's role should be limited to harbour defence or include blue water operations continued; inaction resulted and meanwhile the Australian Navy's ships became obsolete. This all changed at the 1909 Imperial Conference in London when, on the 10 August, the Australian delegates were advised that the Royal Navy could no longer guarantee sea supremacy in the Pacific.² Australia was asked to provide a blue water fleet unit and to ultimately take responsibility for the Australia Station. Back home, despite some opposition, most factions saw advantages in supporting the fleet unit concept, and the Federal Cabinet provisionally endorsed the scheme on 27 September 1909. Whilst these discussions were ensuing, the Minister for Defence, the

Honourable Joseph Cook, MP, sought advice from Commander John T Richardson who was the Acting Naval Commandant of Queensland at the time. Richardson was asked to prepare the following report on the defence of Australian trade routes.³

Today, the Australian Defence Force, particularly the Royal Australian Navy, continues to give priority to the protection of maritime communications. Sea lines of communication security is not only essential for our own economic well-being it is also of national interest to our global trading partners. As Richardson pointed out in 1909, the defence of Australian trade routes is inseparable from the trade routes of the world. Maritime forces that protect trade likewise cannot be understood in narrow national terms. Like the trade routes, modern maritime forces are deployed globally, in coalitions, and are most effective when in a global maritime partnership.



In the early months of World War I the German light cruiser SMS Emden conducted a highly successful campaign against commerce. Emden sank many commercial vessels before she was destroyed by HMAS Sydney (I) (AWM H16829)

Memorandum: For the Honourable, the Minister of State for Defence.

Subject: Notes on the Defence of Australian Trade Routes.

In accordance with your verbal request for my views on the above matter I submit:

THE REPORT ON THE COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE 1906 states definitely, that the only form of attack to be apprehended will be a raiding attack by not more than 4 unarmoured Cruisers.⁴

I am unable to agree with this statement for the following reasons.

That admittedly the game of the weaker Naval Power is to attempt the financial weakening of the stronger Naval adversary by every possible means, chief of which is capture or destruction of his floating commerce. I cannot therefore subscribe to the arguments that delegate the protection of floating commerce to minor position in Naval Strategy.

Oversea Commerce is vital to us and I venture to affirm, that failure to provide for the reasonable if somewhat restricted flow of seaborne Commerce would immediately produce a financial and Industrial breakdown that would inevitably lead to violent political disruption at a time when the national safety is imperilled. There is a definite place among unions assigned to those who do not protect their own interests.

I may here remark that the magnitude of Britain's floating commerce will allow of a certain loss without jeopardizing the power of ultimately recovering that loss, but any serious loss to Australian floating commerce would result in its definite and final transfer, the experience of Holland and the United States would be repeated.

It seems clear to me, and I am not alone of this opinion, that a definite and powerful attack will be made of our floating commerce, and if so it is certain that all the enemies [sic] available vessels not fitted to take part in decisive Fleet actions will be dispatched on raiding expeditions and will be supplemented by armed Merchant Steamers. The wide possibilities of these craft seem to have been almost overlooked; they are cheap, their loss will entail no particular hardship. Their usual avocation being denied them, they will be better employed destroying our commerce. It should be borne in mind that in place of cargo they could carry coal and liquid fuel for their own use and that of their regular Cruisers, in fact they would be armed Colliers, this coupled with a distilling apparatus and the modern means of preserving food would enable them to keep the sea, out of sight of land for long periods, and until they had done an amount of damage far exceeding their own value.

The great difficulty of finding these craft may be illustrated by the case of the 'Perthshire', known to be disabled, drifting, and anxious to make her position known, being searched for by as least 4 vessels and still not discovered after 6 weeks.

It is clear that the measure of commerce protection ('Fortified Harbors of Refuge') as recommended by the Report of the 'Committee of Imperial Defence 1906' is a remedy almost as bad as the disease, floating commerce tied up in 'Harbors of Refuge' cannot by the widest stretch of imagination be termed floating commerce. 'THE PROBLEM IS TO KEEP THE TRADE ROUTES OPEN, NOT TO SUSPEND THE TRADE'.

There is neither efficiency nor economy in the proposal.

As I gathered from your conversation that you desired some definite proposal from me I submit the following:-

That with a view to correctly gauging the amount of Australia's responsibility in the matter, the Admiralty be asked to state, not what they can do, but what they cannot guarantee in the matter of commerce protection, this will be the exact measure of Australia's Naval responsibility and the type and number of vessels must conform to the service required.

In my opinion seagoing cruisers of high speed will be required in addition to the proposed destroyers which will also most certainly be necessary in parts of Australian waters no matter what ultimate form the Australian Navy may take.

I forward under separate cover a chart showing 'Trade Routes of the World' The boundaries of the different Stations of the 'Eastern Fleet' are colored and the Imperial Vessels allotted to each area are shown in attached schedule. [This chart is not held on the NAA file.]

In my opinion they are not sufficiently numerous to more than watch the obligatory points of passage in daylight and to cover a few hostile and Neutral ports, they cannot tell at dawn what force may have passed them during the night and they cannot leave their beat, therefore the danger to floating commerce is as great in 1909 as it has ever been and ships and cargoes will not be risked until some more definite scheme is evolved.

To sum up my opinion is 'THAT AUSTRALIA'S NAVAL RESPONSIBILITY COVERS JUST THAT AREA OVER WHICH THE ROYAL NAVY CANNOT GUARANTEE CONTROL'.

JT Richardson, CNF
Commander
A/ Naval Commandant
Queensland

Dated 20 August 1909

THE EASTERN FLEET

Name of Station	Name of HM Ships on each Station	Type of Ship	Remarks
China	Bedford	Armored	
	Kent	Cruiser	
	King Alfred	Cruiser	
	Monmouth	Cruiser	Total Cruisers 6
	Astrea	Cruiser 2d. Class	
	Flora	Cruiser 2d. Class	
	Fame	Destroyer	
	Hart	Destroyer	
	Otter	Destroyer	
	Virage	Destroyer	
	Whiting	Destroyer	
		Attached ships	16
Australia	Powerful	Cruiser 1st Class	
	Cambrian	Cruiser 2d. Class	
	Challenger	Cruiser 2d. Class	
	Encounter	Cruiser 2d. Class	Total Cruisers 9
	Pegasus	Cruiser 3d. Class	
	Pioneer	Cruiser 3d. Class	
	Prometheus	Cruiser 3d. Class	
	Psyche	Cruiser 3d. Class	
	Pyramus	Cruiser 3d. Class	
Cape of Good Hope	Forte	Cruiser 2d. Class	
	Hermes	Cruiser 3d. Class	
	Pandora	Cruiser 3d. Class	Total Cruisers 3
East Indies	Fox	Cruiser 2nd Class	
	Hyacinth	Cruiser 2nd Class	Total Cruisers 5
	Perseus	Cruiser 3rd Class	
	Philomel	Cruiser 3rd Class	
	Proserpine	Cruiser 3rd Class	
		Attached Ships	3

Notes

- ¹ 'Prime Minister's Press Conference Townsville, 10 September 2008', in GP Gilbert and N Stewart (eds), *Australian Maritime Issues 2008: SPC-A Annual*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No. 27, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2009, p. 9. Full interview available at <<http://www.pm.gov.au/node/5596>> 13 May 2010.
- ² See David Stevens, 'The Australian Navy and the 1909 Imperial Conference on Defence', in this volume.
- ³ The original report is held by the National Archives of Australia under MP178/2/0, File 21652/1/6, Notes on the Defence of Australian Trade Routes, 1909. Conversely, the German plans for a war on Australian commerce are described in J Tampke, (ed), *Ruthless Warfare*, Southern Highlands Publishers, Canberra, 1998.
- ⁴ The Report of the Committee of Imperial Defence, May 1906 has been published in GL Macandie, *The Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1949, pp. 162-6.