

Towards a Marine Force

Albert Palazzo

For the Australian Army, the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) acquisition of two new amphibious ships—known as Landing Helicopter Docks (LHDs)—represents the dawning of a new era in how the land force will do business. The last time the Army conducted an amphibious landing was at Balikpapan on 1 July 1945 in the final days of the Pacific War with Japan. That experience is now a distant memory. If the Army, and by association the Australian Defence Force (ADF), is to make good use of its coming amphibious capability, the land force will have to undergo a transformation as it rediscovers its maritime past while meeting the challenge of future requirements. Amongst the most pressing requirements facing Army, and the ADF, is the need to provide a sustainable landing force, learn the complexities of amphibious operations, and become able to work with Navy with a degree of intimacy and cooperation that has never been achieved before.

While there are few areas of Army that will not be affected by the arrival of the LHDs, one of the most critical issues requiring early resolution in that of manning. Time is short, however. The hull of the HMAS *Canberra* is already in the water and the vessel is due to enter service in 2014, followed by its sister ship in 2015, the HMAS *Adelaide*. When fully staffed, the embarked force, termed the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), will have approximately 2,200 personnel, nearly all drawn from the Army.¹ At present, the Army does not have a dedicated landing force of any size. Admittedly, the Army's establishment does contain a small number of maritime soldiers primarily with 10 Force Support Battalion, but their background is in transport, not amphibious assault.

The Army will soon have to make a decision on how it intends to staff the ARG. In an Army consisting of just seven battalions there are only a few options on how to achieve this. Two choices stand out. The first can be described as the 'narrow but deep approach'. The Army would designate one battalion as the core unit of the ARG and assign to it dedicated combat support and service elements. Perhaps this will even need to be brigade size when all the requisite enablers are added. The battlegroup would become the Army's amphibious specialist with the objective of reaching the standard of US Marine Corps certification so that it achieves the highest

¹ Jonathan Hawkins, 'The Amphibious Ready Group', in Albert Palazzo et al., *Projecting Force: The Australian Army and Maritime Strategy* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2010), p. 49.

capability possible and is able to be interoperable with Australia's most important ally, the United States, if necessary.

The other option can be described as a 'shallow but wide approach'. In this model, the amphibious requirement would rotate amongst the force's three regular brigades. Army would need to reconfigure the brigades so that they are the same, unlike current practice where each has a special focus. This also means that smaller capabilities—tanks and air defence artillery for example—would have to be penny-packeted out to each formation. The effect of this approach would be to spread a degree of maritime expertise across the force, thereby making the entire organisation amphibiously aware. However, due to the limited time period available to each brigade in which to master complex skills, none would ever be able to achieve more than a basic understanding of amphibious operations. US certification would be unobtainable. In fact, anything more complex than a humanitarian relief operation would be beyond their abilities, at least without urgent remediation.

Each option has trade-offs, but it needs to be recognised that only the dedicated amphibious battlegroup approach delivers a usable ARG, one that is capable of undertaking the full spectrum of operations in the maritime environment up to the current doctrinal state of the art, that is Ship-to-Objective Manoeuvre (STOM). The baseline for amphibious skills greatly exceeds that of traditional land warfare; those composing the landing force must become masters of both the land and maritime environments, as well as the dangerous transition from ship to shore (and back again).² To achieve the required degree of expertise, the Army will have to allocate to the amphibious battlegroup a disproportionate share of the force's funding in order to obtain specialist equipment, and to provide for the necessary enhanced training and exercises. In an era that anticipates an increasingly constrained defence financial environment, the cost of creating an effective ARG will ultimately be borne by the rest of the Army.

However, while there is a need for the ARG to be robust, the Army will have to guard against the rest of the force trending towards hollowness. The effect on the ARG's raising on the broader force is probably manageable, but the necessity for creating a fully capable amphibious battlegroup is not. While most amphibious operations succeed in the end, the cost can be painful. An Army the size of Australia's cannot afford a single 'Dieppe' because of an inadequately prepared ARG. Rather, 'it must get its amphibious operations right first time, every time.'³

It also needs to be recognised that there is a further consequence of manning a dedicated amphibious battlegroup. It will be hard to avoid the

² Ibid.

³ Robert Moyse, 'Manoeuvre in the Littoral Environment', in Peter Kerr (ed.), *Peter Mitchell Essays, 2003* (Canberra: Sea Power Centre Australia, 2005), p. 77.

gradual emergence of perception, both within and outside Army, that its amphibious elements are an elite sub-component of the whole. The main Army could find itself the second eleven, or even third eleven if Special Forces are considered. However, while some may find such a development unpalatable, it does reflect reality. Soldiers who are more highly trained and capable than the norm are, in fact, elite.

It is tempting to accept that such a schism in the status of the Army's force elements needs to be avoided at all cost. That is not the case. In bearing the expense of acquiring high-end amphibious ships, the Australian Government has confirmed, with little room for argument, a requirement for that capability. The 2009 Defence White Paper is clear on this point, and since Defence has already purchased the requisite ships it can be anticipated that the next white paper will be even more emphatic.⁴ The Army, therefore, has an obligation to provide government with what it seeks. The Army will need government to articulate clearly the degree of capability it wants the amphibious force to maintain. Only then will Army's leaders be able to shape the force in the manner sought.

The US Marine Corps has studied the art of maritime manoeuvre and amphibious assault since before the Second World War. Until a few years ago, the Australian Army had given the subject little thought, and whatever institutional memory it had gained during the war with Japan had long dissipated. Soldiers need to learn not just how to live on board a ship, but also how to get off and fight. They must master the art of helicopter assault and landing craft movement. Many of these skill sets have been identified in concept papers, but learning them will take time. The ARG's staff will need to learn how to coordinate effects across the three dimensions of the battlespace. Logistics staff will need to relearn how to combat load a vessel, and how to adjust the cargo mix when the mission changes, without returning to port. Army, as a whole, will also have to refocus its mental state. It will need to understand the opportunities that follow from having the ability to manoeuvre in the maritime environment, much in the manner that the RAN already does. These skill sets represent just a few of the techniques that Army will have to acquire, and show the complexity of the task that lies ahead.

Amphibious warfare will also require a greater understanding of the concept of jointness by Australia's three services. The ADF has made great strides in moving from separate services to a joint force. However, when reflecting upon amphibious operations, it is clear how much more needs to be achieved before the three services can operate seamlessly. Army will need to come to terms with the concept of manoeuvre in the maritime

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), paras 9.23-25.

environment, seeing the sea as much a manoeuvre space as the land, and coming to a degree of understanding that matches that of the RAN.

There is an assumption, probably resulting from the close ties that exist between Australia and the United States, that it is to the competency of the US Marines that Army should aspire. Yet, the US Marine Corps might be the wrong model; an ambition too grand to achieve for such a small organisation as the Australian Army, at least in the short to mid-term perspective. As befits a military service of a great power, the US Marines Corps is equipped, manned and funded at levels that Australia could never consider, even adjusting for the size difference between the two countries. Moreover, more than 200 years of history and tradition are force multipliers of their own. Even Britain's Royal Marines are probably still too big to serve as an appropriate point of comparison, although that may no longer be the case given the defence reductions that have taken place in that country. But there are other Western state military forces that can serve as models. The Netherlands may prove a more apt point of comparison although its marines are brigade sized and belong to its navy. Another potentially useful reference would be Italy. Its navy maintains a marine force called the San Marco Regiment, while the army controls the amphibious-focused Lagunari Regiment. The sizes of both units are reasonably similar to Australia's ARG requirement.

So far this essay has discussed the LHDs from the perspective of an operational capability. There is, however, one further aspect of their utility that requires discussion if these ships are to achieve their full potential. There is a danger that the Australian Government and the ADF will be seduced by the effectiveness of these ships at the operational level of war, with the decisions on their employment becoming a function of their capability. It is not hard to foresee a future in which the LHDs serve as a nautical fire brigade racing from one crisis to another across the region, as the ships respond to humanitarian, climatic, evacuation and even war fighting emergencies. What is missing from this future, however, is a sense of how the LHDs will contribute to the attainment of a defined national strategic end. The 2009 Defence White Paper recognises that Australia's regional geography requires the ADF to have an expeditionary capability but is mute on the question to what strategic purpose.⁵ Hopefully, the government's next white paper will clearly articulate a strategic goal whose attainment will determine the use of these vessels. Anything less risks seeing the LHD's achieve repeated operational effect, without resulting in a cumulative strategic success.

The LHDs are coming. For Army, this represents an exciting time as it comes to grips, along with the RAN, a new and powerful capability. The challenges that lie ahead are immense, but Australia cannot deny its

⁵ Ibid., para 6.42.

geography. The government requires an amphibious capability that is able to operate throughout its primary operational environment, which is overwhelmingly maritime. Yet it must do so in a way that does not hollow out the capabilities of the rest of the force. This will be a delicate task, but it is doable with government guidance on where the priorities lie. In the end, it will come down to balance.

Dr Albert Palazzo is a Senior Research Fellow with the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis, Australian Army. He has written widely on the Australian Army, strategy, adaptation, logistics and military professionalism. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Australian Army, the Department of Defence or the Australian Government. Albert.Palazzo@defence.gov.au.