Defending the Northern Gateway

Peter Donovan
DEFENDING THE NORTHERN GATEWAY

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Published by
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
Research School of Pacific Studies
The Australian National University
Canberra, Australia,
1989
ABSTRACT

Darwin the capital of the Northern Territory is closer to the major population centres of south-east Asia than those of Australia, and for a long time was the only town of any size in Australia’s sparsely populated north. The apparent vulnerability of the far north of Australia became a matter of increasing concern to many Australians because of the shifting balance of military power in the region during the early twentieth century, more particularly, the scaling down of the Royal Navy presence and the emergence of Japan as a modern military power. However, little was done to address this concern because those responsible for formulating and implementing Australian defence policy remained convinced of the efficacy of the policy which had persisted virtually unchanged since the mid-nineteenth century. This meant that the sense of alarm in Australia was all the greater when the weakness of this policy became apparent soon after the entry of the Japanese into the war.

This monograph seeks to provide a historical overview of the development of Australia’s defence policy and the role in it ascribed to Darwin and the Northern Territory up to and including World War II. It also includes a brief history of development in the Northern Territory because throughout the period the notion of development and defence were closely allied.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was undertaken while a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, at the Australian National University, during 1988. Grateful acknowledgement is made for the help and assistance rendered by Professor Desmond Ball, Colonel J. O. Langtry (Ret.), and Mrs Billie Dalrymple. This project was made possible by a research grant from the Department of Defence.
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph looks at the history of efforts to protect, what many have regarded as, Australia's northern gateway. It looks at the manner in which threats to northern Australia's security have been perceived, and the steps that have been taken to avert them.

The purpose of this monograph is to complement the work on the Northern Territory and its place in Australia's defence planning that is presently being undertaken by others in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre of the Australian National University. Specifically, its purpose is to provide a historical perspective and context for the current work. Thus it provides a short history of the Northern Territory and an overview of Australian foreign policy until the period of the Second World War.

I must insist though that this does not pretend to provide more than a general overview. Many features of this history are already the subjects of detailed books; the history of the Northern Territory during World War II has already filled three books, the latest and most comprehensive being that by Alan Powell, The Shadow's Edge: Australia's Northern War, (1988). Numbers of other studies have dealt with the defence of Australia, both before and after Federation: a veritable library has been written about Federation itself. Many of these studies are referred to here, and any student wishing to explore features of this story in more detail should follow these references.

Though this monograph builds upon the work of others, I believe that it treats the question of Australian defence and the Northern Territory in a different fashion from other works. Because all change has deep roots in the past this story begins in the nineteenth century. This serves to highlight milestones in the history of Australia's defence policy, and illustrates the slowness of change in this policy, and underscores the importance of lessons to be learned from the World War II experience. Even then this can only tell one part of the story: this is why the provision of so many references is so important. As the historian Keith Hancock has said, 'The history we write will contain flaws. Other Historians will expose them. We ourselves will rectify some of them.'
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The advancement of knowledge will be achieved in the process of questioning, answering and debating.¹

As mentioned above, this study is concerned with Australia's defence policies up to and including the watershed of World War II. A history of the search for new policies since that time has been addressed by numbers of defence analysts and is more properly the preserve of others working in the Strategic Defence Studies Centre.

In the period before World War II, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a broad view has been taken of the idea of defence. Thus in the first chapters there is a great deal of emphasis on initiatives to 'develop' the Northern Territory. While many contemporaries certainly considered these initiatives in the narrow sense of trying to exploit the Territory commercially, others, particularly politicians, believed that its economic development was a fundamental necessity for precluding other nationals from colonising the region. Indeed, the admonition to 'Populate or Perish' remained popular until very recent years, and even in the nineteen eighties people still talk of 'Defence through Development' in the north.²

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² See address of Hon. P.V. Jones, in the Report of the 1982 Northern Australian Development Seminar held in Port Hedland, Western Australia.
CHAPTER 1

EARLY INTEREST IN NORTH AUSTRALIA, TO 1863

The centres of population on the north coast of Australia are closer to the major population centres of South East Asia than those of the settled areas of Australia. Because of this much of the history of settlement and development in northern Australia has been determined by its proximity to nations of Asia.

Early Interest in Northern Australia

Some of the first people to take a sustained interest in the northern part of the Australian continent were from South-East Asia. It has yet to be determined when the Macassans from the southern Celebes first began to make regular voyages to the north coast. However, for several generations from about the beginning of the eighteenth century fishing fleets from the islands north of Australia travelled on the seasonal winds and tides to fish in northern Australian waters for the trepang or beche-de-mer, a commodity in great demand in Asia.1 Regularly, upwards of 2,000 camped along the northern coasts for four or five months each year, collecting and preserving the trepang. During this time they had a major effect upon the Aboriginal societies of the area. However, they had no desire to settle permanently in this land and were never considered a threat by Aboriginal inhabitants.

European Interest in Northern Australia

The first European visitors in their large craft who happened upon the western and northern shores of the Great South Land did so precisely because of their economic imperialism in the region of South-East Asia, and the foundation of several major trading stations there.

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FIGURE 1

Map Illustrating the Relationship of the Northern Territory to Major Population Centres of the Region

Each circle represents 830 kilometres (500 miles) from Darwin

In 1596 the Dutch became the first Europeans to establish a permanent commercial presence in the East Indies. They were followed by representatives of the commercial empires of Spain and Portugal. All were merchants and had no designs upon the annexation or settlement of the southern continent.

The Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese sailors and their masters were more interested in trade between their homelands and populous nations of south eastern Asia. The large land, that they sometimes encountered on their voyage across the Indian Ocean when they strayed too far to the south and east, appeared barren and inhospitable and gave no promise of valuable commodities that they might profitably trade. It attracted little interest.

However, the Dutch, ever seeking to extend their East Indian trading empire, were the first Europeans to show a sustained interest in the north of Australia, after the *Duyfken* traced out the western coast of Cape York Peninsula in 1606. Though not interested in the new world as a place of settlement, from their base at Batavia they did carry out some desultory exploration that served to increase knowledge of the southern continent. The most extensive of these explorations was that of Abel Tasmen in 1644 when he charted the coast of northern Australia from Cape York to Shark Bay in western Australia. Disappointed in the region as a possible source of articles of trade, and with a secure presence in the East Indian Archipelago, they were willing to leave the country to the hostile Aborigines, and whoever else desired it.

**British Interest**

The British were the next to devote attention to northern Australia. They did so precisely because they had no presence in the region east of Singapore. In the first instance though, the interest was primarily scientific and was satisfied by several expeditions originating from their penal colony in Sydney.

In 1788, Britain had extended her empire to the Australian continent when she established a penal colony at Port Jackson. Later, it was felt to be in the interests of the mother country to learn more about the continent. Therefore on 19 January 1801, Captain Matthew Flinders,
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RN, was chosen by the Admiralty to explore the coasts of the Great South Land.2

From December 1801 to March, 1803, Flinders closely examined the southern and eastern coasts of Australia from Cape Leeuwin to Arnhem Bay in the north. He was not impressed by the north country as a region for settlement but noted that he quitted the coast with regret, since 'its numerous harbours and better soil, and its greater proximity to our Indian possessions ... made it become daily more interesting'.3

In 1817, the Admiralty once more took in hand the work of charting Australia's coast. In February of that year, Captain Phillip Parker King, RN, was commissioned to survey the unexplored parts of the coast of New South Wales.

From late January 1818, when he began his work from King George's Sound, until mid-February 1822, when he was forced to return to Port Jackson for the last time, King made four voyages to the west and north coasts of Australia. He made a detailed examination of the Cobourg Peninsula and Van Diemen's Gulf, and circumnavigated both Melville and Bathurst Islands. He saw what was later named Port Darwin, and also the estuary of the Victoria River, though examined neither in detail. Like Flinders, King was intent on making running surveys and charting a great length of coastline rather than the detailed examination of its many features; consequently, he was unable to record much information about the country beyond the coastline.

However, King spent six days examining Port Essington on the Cobourg Peninsula, and he was sufficiently impressed by it to recommend it as a possible place of settlement.4 Generally, King was not impressed with north Australia, but, like Flinders, he imagined that it could be turned to good use.

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Early Interest in North Australia

British Settlements in North Australia

Soon afterwards Britain established the first of three outposts in northern Australia. However, the British interest in doing so was determined primarily by the wish to exploit the trade of the East Indian Archipelago rather than any perceived economic potential in the vast land beyond the northern coast. Strategic considerations were important in the location of these outposts, but in the first instance the idea was to establish an economic rather than a military advantage in the region.5

British merchants had gained ready access to the previously restricted Eastern markets during the Napoleonic wars when the Dutch possessions were seized and the British East India Company's monopoly revoked in July 1813. However, in 1816, the Dutch possessions were returned in accordance with the terms of the convention signed at London on 13 August 1814. Thereafter, Dutch interests began to re-assert their influence in the East Indian Archipelago. They were particularly aggrieved when, on 30 January 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles signed a treaty with the Sultan of Johore which transferred the island of Singapore to the British East India Company. However, Singapore gave British merchants access only to the western region of the Archipelago. Efforts were made to establish a 'second Singapore' in the east.

Plans for a British establishment on the north coast of New South Wales were mooted in 1823 by the merchant adventurer, William Barnes. For twenty years he had traded throughout the East.6 In an effort to gain support for his idea of a commercial enterprise, Barnes introduced himself to the East Indian Trade Committee, which comprised a number of influential London merchant houses. The committee took up the idea, and urged the Colonial Office to found a settlement in north Australia so that it might fulfil the role in the east of the archipelago that Singapore


6 Howard, 'English Activities', p.71.
fulfilled in the west. They also urged that steps be taken to protect the settlement.

With respect to the Second consideration, its importance as a military Station, the Committee would beg leave to observe that, in the event of any future hostilities with the Government of the Netherlands, the whole of the Trade of the Eastern Archipelago would be exposed to a Successful attack from the Dutch, . . . The establishment of the British in the proposed Situation would not only furnish the desired protection to our Trade in that quarter, but would give Security to the East India Company's and the Indian private Trade to China by the Eastern route.

John Barrow, the second secretary of the Admiralty, supported the plans for a British establishment on Australia's north coast, though he was primarily concerned to secure a British presence there for strategic reasons. The Colonial Office was ultimately convinced of the value of the proposed outpost, and early in 1824 requested the Admiralty to despatch a ship and establish a British presence on Australia's north coast.

Captain Gordon Bremer, RN, was instructed to found two outposts if possible - one at Port Essington and the other at Melville Island. However, he had insufficient troops to garrison both, and when the expedition arrived off Port Essington in September 1824 during the dry season, and was unable to find water, Bremer decided upon Melville Island as the site for Britain's newest outpost in Australia.

The site selected for Fort Dundas was on Melville Island on the eastern shore of Apsley Strait. It may have been adequate from a military point of view, but it was not a good site for a sea-port which was expected to become the great entrepôt of the East Indian Archipelago because of the treacherous shoals that blocked the southern entrance of the strait.

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Nor was the post the economic success which had been envisaged. Indeed, the treaty between Britain and the Netherlands signed on 17 March 1824, guaranteed the rights of merchants of both nations to trade in the East Indian Archipelago, thereby removing one of the major obstacles to British traders in the region, and the reason for their insisting on the eastern entrepôt.

More immediate difficulties beset the outpost. The wet season made life unpleasant for the pioneers. The brig, *Lady Nelson*, which was based at Fort Dundas, was lost at sea early in 1825, after two unsuccessful attempts to gather supplies from the archipelago. No Malays arrived to do business, since the trepang beds, which they came to the Australian coast to exploit, were much further to the east. The plight of the 'outcasts' became almost intolerable when sickness became prevalent early in 1827.

However, in April 1826, the colonial secretary, with the support of the East India Trade Committee, decided upon forming a second outpost in the vicinity of the Cobourg Peninsula, as a means of salvaging something from the enterprise.10

Captain James Stirling was commissioned to found the second outpost. He arrived off Raffles Bay on 17 June 1827. Being convinced of the worth of the site,11 he immediately ordered the construction of Fort Wellington, which, when completed, was left in the charge of Captain Henry Smyth. The new commandant was prejudiced against the enterprise from the beginning. He had been loath to go to the north, and, once there, immediately set about requesting a transfer elsewhere. His reports invariably condemned the outpost and its prospects. However, in February 1828, the first Malay proas appeared,12 and by the end of March a trepang fishing station was established at Raffles Bay.

Under Captain Collet Barker, who succeeded Smyth in September 1828, conditions at Raffles Bay improved considerably, especially relations with the Aborigines. Because of the continued difficulties at Melville Island, complemented by Aboriginal hostility there, it was

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decided to abandon that settlement, and to remove the personnel to Raffles Bay. The move was completed in January 1829.

But while conditions at Raffles Bay improved, the Colonial Office continued to receive the adverse reports of Smyth, because of the communication lag between London and the remote outpost. In November 1828, it determined to abandon the north of Australia completely. These orders were carried out in August 1829, when those remaining at Raffles Bay were removed to the Swan River colony in Western Australia.

British interest in the occupation of Australia's north waned until April 1836. This time the idea was championed by George Windsor Earl, at that time a member of the Royal Asiatic Society, and one who had travelled extensively throughout the East. He approached the Colonial Office with a plan for the settlement of north Australia. He failed, but did succeed in capturing the interest of the Royal Geographical Society, which enjoyed the patronage of several influential members of the British government, and which was at that time interested in the problems of north Australia.

After some lobbying, the idea of the establishment of another outpost on Australia's north coast received government approval. Once again it is difficult to establish the relative weight of the arguments that swayed those making the decisions. Earl's concern was to establish a commercial entrepôt. However, the support of the Admiralty was necessary for the scheme and it is evident that strategic considerations carried more weight there, particularly because of rumours of French plans to occupy the region. Already strategic concerns had prompted the establishment of an outpost at King Georges Sound at the western side of the Great Australian Bight in 1826, in order to help protect the vital southern shipping lane to eastern Australia; at this time it was also considered important to have an outpost near the northern trade routes from Sydney to India.

13 Howard, 'English Activities', pp.45-6.
14 Allen, 'Port Essington', p.348.
In his letter to Lord John Russell of 18 April, 1840, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners urged the new settlement as a place of call for ships using Torres Strait, and as a place for trade,

But it will be seen that several other questions are involved in the subject. Upon grounds of general expediency, and independently of the peculiar facilities which this situation may possess as a naval station, or as a commercial depot, it appears in the highest degree desirable that the northern coast of New Holland should be made British territory by actual occupation. As affecting the security, peace and inter-colonial traffic of our other Australian settlements, and also as giving us the command of the navigation of Torres Straits, and of commerce off the Indian Archipelago, a permanent establishment on the northern coast of New Holland might possibly have seemed an object worthy the attention of the British Government, even at some cost to the country.16

A settlement at Port Essington was established in November 1838, by Captain Sir Gordon Bremer accompanied by George Earl as interpreter and commissioner of crown lands, together with a detachment of Royal Marines under the command of Captain John McArthur, RN. In March 1839, seventy-five Macassans set up a camp at Port Essington while they engaged in fishing. This suggested to Bremer that the economic success of the new settlement was assured, and he left Fort Victoria in June 1839, confident of this success.

However, after eleven years this outpost, too, was abandoned.17 The climate proved to be extremely enervating to the Europeans: Captain Stokes later suggested that it might not have been 'absolutely pernicious in itself', but claimed that it was 'unsuited to European constitutions'.18 An outbreak of malaria in 1843, was followed by other calamities. The infant settlement was razed by a hurricane late in 1839, and ravaged by white ants in the succeeding years. Besides these discomforts, the settlers

were forced to endure prolonged periods of isolation, without any encouragement being given to the expansion of the outpost. Potential free settlers, who had expressed interest in taking up residence when plans for Port Essington had been suggested, were dissuaded from doing so by the restrictive regulations concerning the alienation of land. Private enterprise was not actively encouraged, and McArthur's efforts in trying to attract Malays or Chinese to Port Essington were unsuccessful.

Moreover, while the early fears of French designs on north Australia may have been real enough, Britain's chief maritime rival showed no concern to establish a presence on a Australia's north coast.

Doubts about the future of Fort Victoria developed when the British government directed that it would approve no more than the current expense of the establishment after 1843. Although the Admiralty agreed to maintain the post as a military base, its decision of 1844 to reduce the East Indian Squadron, meant that fewer war vessels called at the settlement, and its isolation was increased. Then, as a consequence of further exploration of the north coast, the idea of a station on or near the strategically important Torres Strait became increasingly attractive. It was originally expected that Port Essington would serve as a refuge for sailors wrecked in Torres Strait, but it was obviously too far from the strait to fulfil this role.

Then, in 1845, Sir John Barrow, the major supporter of the station at Port Essington retired from the Admiralty. Its continued existence was further jeopardized when, in mid-1846, the Admiralty decided to withdraw the marines who were stationed there. Its fate was sealed in early 1849 when the India and Australia Steam Packet Company informed the Admiralty that it had no need of Port Essington as a coaling station. Finally, in mid-1849, the Colonial Office informed Fitzroy, the governor of New South Wales that it had come 'to the conclusion that there are not sufficient grounds for continuing to put the country to the

expense of maintaining the post at Port Essington'.

On 1 December 1849, the third British attempt to establish an outpost on Australia's north coast was abandoned.

None of the three British outposts established in North Australia had been conceived as the nucleus of another colony in Australia: indeed, the first of the outposts had been established on an island off the northern coast. Those stationed at the outposts were more concerned with protection of the trade routes and the exploitation of the commercial opportunities to their north rather than the economic potential of the vast land at their backs.

Nor did the early settlers show any concern for learning about the land in which they found themselves, and no attempts were made to explore the region except for the Cobourg Peninsula. Yet the existence of Port Essington, at least, encouraged exploration by others. Port Essington was a base from which the Beagle undertook the detailed exploration of the north coast, and it was the goal of Leichhardt's overland expedition from Moreton Bay.

The Beagle, under the command of Captain J.C. Wickham, RN, was commissioned by the Admiralty during 1837, to refine the work done by previous navigators by engaging in an extensive detailed examination of the Australian coastline rather than in another running survey. The detailed survey revealed Port Darwin, and subsequently the Victoria River. Both were examined extensively, the latter for nearly two months.

The voyages of the Beagle largely completed the early work of coastal exploration in northern Australia. But when coastal exploration ceased, land exploration began.

**Land Exploration**

The foundation of an outpost at Port Essington roused a great deal of interest in Sydney. It prompted the appointment of a select committee of the Legislative Council to enquire into the cost and benefit of an overland route from the settled districts of New South Wales to the northern settlement. Ludwig Leichhardt, recently returned from two years'
exploration north of Moreton Bay, set about organizing a private venture to travel overland to Port Essington to blaze such a route.  

Leichhardt and his men left Moreton Bay in late September 1844, expecting to be five or six months on their journey. They did not reach Port Essington till 17 December 1845, nearly fifteen months after their departure. Benefits of the expedition were few. The explorers certainly covered nearly five thousand kilometres of hitherto unexplored country in the vicinity of the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land, but they had been forced to follow the coastline closely, and were unable to learn a great deal about the interior.

Initiative for the next significant exploration of the northern hinterland came from Britain. Once again London commercial interests were primarily responsible. A city merchant, anxious to consolidate British commerce in the East Indies, offered £10,000 to the Royal Geographical Society to sponsor further exploration and settlement on Australia's northern coast. Early in 1854, the Society accepted the task, consulted men such as Stokes, Sturt and Eyre, then approached the British government to secure its support for an exploring expedition to north Australia. The government agreed to support the expedition with a grant of £5,000, but in return assumed effective control.

A.C. Gregory, at that time assistant-surveyor in Western Australia, was appointed leader of the expedition charged with the task of examining the region of the Victoria River and the river systems to the east. His party sailed from Moreton Bay in mid-1855, making land at the Victoria River late in September. For the next eight months Gregory examined the country in the vicinity of the Victoria River. Early in June 1856, Gregory set off eastwards towards the Gulf region, and, until he reached Moreton Bay on 16 December, closely followed the tracks of Leichhardt, discovering little which was unknown. He was not enthusiastic about the economic potential of the north.

26 *South Australian Parliamentary Paper, 117-1854*.
Gregory's expedition closed an era in the history of North Australia. Except for Leichhardt's expedition, all initiatives concerning the north had been taken in Britain. Most of these were concerned with establishing an economic, and later, a naval presence in the vast Archipelago to the north rather than the exploitation the vast continent to the south.

Thereafter, initiatives concerning the north came from the Australian colonies, and attention turned to the exploration and exploitation of the vast region between the north coast of the continent and the southern settled areas. Ultimately another settlement was established on the north coast. Those who peopled this northern settlement, and those responsible for it were certainly conscious of the populous nations to their north and the economic potential of trade with them. However, because they did not have the same economic or strategic concerns of the British authorities, and because they felt safe under the protection of the British fleet, the focus of their attention was inland rather than off-shore.
CHAPTER 2

SETTLING SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S NORTHERN TERRITORY, 1863-85

In 1863, the vast region of the Northern Territory came under the control of South Australia, a separate colony since 1836, and at the time with a population of only 140,000. The potential of trade with the nations to the north of Australia figured prominently in the arguments for the annexation of the north and for several major capital projects that were later begun there. However, the attention of settlers there and in the mother colony to the south was primarily concerned with developments in the hinterland.

The South Australians who assumed control of the Northern Territory had not the same Imperial and strategic perspectives of the Colonial Office and Admiralty administrators who had earlier taken an interest in northern Australia. The populous but apparently undeveloped nations to their north posed no military threat and the changing balance of power in Europe seemed remote. Local rather than international politics concerned those responsible for the Territory.

South Australians did what they could to exploit the economic potential of the Northern Territory, largely without success. However, while doing so, they succeeded in establishing a permanent settlement on the north coast of the continent, thereby ensuring an Anglo-Saxon presence there. They also initiated two capital intensive projects, in particular, the construction of the Overland Telegraph and construction of a railway that many hoped would span the continent. Both of these had implications for continuing debate about the ability of Australians to defend the north coast.

South Australia's Northern Territory

John McDouall Stuart, through his explorations in north Australia, was primarily responsible for stimulating South Australian interest in the region. Something of the public interest and enthusiasm

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which Stuart's explorations aroused was evident from the adulation with which colonists greeted him on his return to Adelaide after having crossed the continent to the north coast. In his despatch to the colonial secretary, Governor Daly claimed that 'it would be difficult to exaggerate the enthusiasm and the interest which were manifested by the vast multitude who had assembled on the occasion, many from distant parts of the country all desirous to do honor to the first & most successful of Australian explorers'.

Stuart made several attempts to cross the continent in the period from 1860 to mid-1862. He penetrated further north on each occasion, but the shortage of rations, lack of water, or the hostility of Aborigines, forced him to abandon each attempt. Finally on 24 July 1862, his party reached the north coast. According to Stuart, the country about the north coast was 'well adapted for the settlement of an European settlement, the climate being in every respect suitable, and the surrounding country of excellent quality and of great extent'.

Governor R.G. MacDonnell, after Stuart, did most to interest South Australians in the possibility of annexing the vast region to their north. For several years prior to Stuart's crossing to the north coast, MacDonnell waged a campaign with the Colonial Office for an increase in the colony's area. South Australia's annexation of the region to its north grew out of this campaign.

It was a popular cause. Colonists supported the annexation for a multitude of reasons, though the question of Australia's defence was not one of them. To some the benefits that would be derived were as intangible as increased prestige for the colony, to others it meant that new land would become available for pastoral and agricultural enterprise, while for others it would prompt the establishment of a commercial entrepôt close to the populous nations of South-East Asia.

Persistence was rewarded when, in September, 1863, the Royal Letters Patent altering the boundaries of South Australia arrived in the colony. Steps were immediately taken to establish a settlement of the

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2 South Australian Register, 22 January, 1863.
3 GRG 2/6, 4/63, Public Record Office, Adelaide.
north coast, in much the same fashion that Adelaide had been established. Arrangements were made for the prior sale of land in Adelaide and London in order to provide the funds required to establish the colony and its capital.

**Problems in establishing the site for a capital**

The apparent success of the land sales encouraged the government to proceed to organize the survey expedition that was to select the site for the northern capital. It is apparent from the manner in which the expeditionary force was organized that ministers regarded the task of colonizing the tropical north coast as an easy one. This was not to be.

Boyle Travers Finniss, one of those who had surveyed the site for Adelaide and its surroundings and later a man of great distinction in colonial South Australia\(^5\) was given the honour of selecting the site for the capital of the new colony, and supervising its foundation. His Northern Territory Survey Expedition departed Adelaide on 29 April, 1864. It failed in its object. With a minimum of exploration of likely sites, Finniss insisted that Palmerston, the northern capital, should be established at Escape Cliffs near the Adelaide River.

The choice was criticised by many of the Expedition, which had been characterised by divisions before it arrived at the north coast: it was repudiated by the government. Yet while his choice was vetoed by the government, Finniss refused to look seriously for an alternative. He was recalled in disgrace in September, 1865, to answer charges that he had failed to carry out his instructions.

Because Finniss had failed to explore the region adequately, the government commissioned the renowned explorer, John McKinlay, to examine the north coast hinterland thoroughly, and to determine the most advantageous site for Palmerston. He too returned to Adelaide with his reputation in tatters.

Though he arrived at Escape Cliffs in November, 1865, McKinlay did not set about his task until January, 1866 at the height of the Wet season. He found it virtually impossible to cross the waterlogged coastal plains, had the party marooned in one place for 44 days,

and spent a fortnight searching for a lost member. Divisions split the party. Finally, when the party reached the West Alligator River, little more than 160 kilometres in a direct line from Adam Bay, all hope was abandoned of reaching Liverpool Bay, their original goal. On 9 June, they decided to build a punt from saplings and the hides of their remaining horses and attempt to sail back to Escape Cliffs. After many adventures they reached safety on 6 July.

McKinlay's failure also prompted the recall of the rump of the original surveying expedition which could do nothing until the site for the capital was determined.

In January 1867, the government turned to Captain Francis Cadell who had pioneered the navigation of the River Murray. His choice of a site on the Liverpool River, 250 kilometres ESE from Port Essington in Arnhem Land, was also repudiated after a further waste of effort, time, and dwindling finances.

Settlement at Port Darwin

Finally, as a last act of desperation, the government charged Surveyor-General George Woodroffe Goyder with the task of selecting the site for the northern capital. That it should acquiesce to the conditions of service laid down by Goyder highlighted the desperate straits to which the later South Australian governments were reduced. The government agreed to all of Goyder's demands, even to the suggestion that Port Darwin would be the 'probable place of debarkation... at or near Point Emery', and that 'the surveys would, in all probability, be commenced in the neighbourhood of Port Darwin and extend thence, in a south-easterly direction to the better lands on either side of the Upper Adelaide'.

Goyder claimed that he had decided upon Port Darwin as the capital site after studying the records of previous explorations together with information from the officers of the Beatrice. Yet few other areas had been closely examined, and none of them had been examined by Goyder personally.

In late 1868, however, the five-year period during which the government had promised to complete the surveys was quickly drawing to a close, and many of the land-order holders were determined to have their

money returned rather than the land acquired. Consequently, the government was more concerned to select a suitable site for the northern capital rather than necessarily the best site.

The question of the determination of the site for the northern capital had been a vexed one. Finniss and Cadell had been severely criticized for having determined their choices before their expeditions left Adelaide. But Goyder's choice received greater acceptance because of the almost universal condemnation of the choices of Finniss and Cadell, and the general failure of the McKinlay expedition. Moreover it conformed to colonists' predispositions. South Australians who concerned themselves with the Territory's colonization were predisposed towards a site in the north-west region of the Territory. Reasons for this were never made explicit, but in the 1862 submissions to the Colonial Office hopes were entertained for trade with South-East Asia and a settlement on the north-west coast was a logical, first move.

However, while Port Darwin had few obvious disadvantages as the capital site, it possessed few definite virtues. It was healthy enough, but the surrounding country was unsuitable for agriculture, and access to the interior was difficult. In 1868, however, the government was concerned to select a site for the capital as quickly as possible. Goyder's choice was accepted without evident demur.

Goyder wasted no time in having the region surveyed. His party arrived at Port Darwin on 5 February 1869. Within a few hours various work parties were organized to establish the camp, to sink wells for water, and to prepare for the surveying. By 1 March 1869, the sites of the capital and three country townships were determined - Palmerston, Virginia, Southport and Daly. By 3 May, the first three of these were surveyed together with a number of country allotments.

Palmerston, the capital, was surveyed on the headland, eighteen to forty-five metres above sea level, to the north of Fort Hill. The capital was divided into 1,019 residential blocks, each of half an acre (0.2 hectare). Like Adelaide it was set out on a grid pattern which included parks, a central square, and parkland surrounds. The work proceeded with

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7 'Northern Territory Survey Expedition 1868/70', MS Diary kept by Surveyor-General G.W. Goyder, 1438, Mortlock Library of South Australiana.
such briskness that the survey was completed by late August.\textsuperscript{8} It finally totalled 665,866 acres (269,476 hectares), when town reserves and roads are included. Goyder arranged for those who were to remain at Palmerston to continue with extra surveys and the erection of permanent accommodation. He then returned to Adelaide by the \textit{Guinare}, late in September. Land-order holders were able to take up their entitlements at last.

After several years of indecision and apparent mismanagement by successive governments, Palmerston was established at Port Darwin, and a rudimentary administration created for the new colony in north Australia. It remained to be seen if this community would be more permanent or successful than the four previous north coast outposts.

The Overland Telegraph

Initiatives taken soon after the foundation of Palmerston helped to ensure its survival. In 1870 the government agreed to construct a telegraph line from Port Augusta to Port Darwin, there to join with a submarine cable from Java, and ultimately Europe.\textsuperscript{9}

Proposals for telecommunications between Australia and Britain were almost as old as telegraphy in Australia. In 1859, Francis Gisborne, a representative of the British-based Red Sea and India Telegraph Company, visited the eastern colonies in an effort to secure support for a proposal to connect Moreton Bay with Singapore by means of a submarine cable.

However, because of the pioneering nature of the work of telecommunications, early promoters such as Gisborne demanded substantial subsidies from the Australian colonies. These subsidies dissuaded the colonies from acting independently, and the 'inability' of the British government 'to co-operate with the Governments of Australia to establish the proposed communication' between Europe and Australia cooled the colonists' ardour.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{SAPP, 161-1869/70, SAPP, 204-1869/70, GRG, 35, 11/2, PRO.}
\textsuperscript{9} Peter Donovan, \textit{A Land Full of Possibilities, a History of South Australia's Northern Territory}, (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981), pp.8-94.
However, the British Australian Telegraph Company, floated in London in January 1870, ultimately succeeded in connecting the telegraph system of Australia with that of Europe. The company proposed to lay a cable from Singapore to Batavia, and another from Banjoewangie, on east Java, to Port Darwin, then to construct a land-line to meet the Queensland telegraph system at Burketown, in the north-west of that colony. No subsidies were demanded from the Australian colonies: the company believed that the recovery of construction costs and a sufficient profit would be forthcoming from control of the traffic along the cable.

When the Company's representative, Commander Noel Osborn, arrived in Adelaide, early in April 1870, seeking permission to land the cable at Port Darwin, and to take a land-line from there to Burketown, he met a government firmly resolved to have his company's cable connected directly to the South Australian telegraphic system.

The Governor, Sir James Fergusson, touched upon the apparent reason for his government's insistence upon the construction of the overland line in his speech at the opening of parliament on 27 May 1870. With the immediate possibility of telecommunications between London and Australia, he claimed that 'the interests of this colony will be best served by the construction of a telegraph line direct from Port Darwin to Port Augusta'. It was not clear precisely how this would be done. Construction of the line and the establishment of telegraph stations at intervals across the continent would certainly open up a track through the interior, but of itself it would do nothing to guarantee its use by settlers; and Port Darwin was assured of permanency as the terminus of the submarine cable whether the land-line went south to Port Augusta or south-east to Burketown. Moreover, a report on the overland line by Charles Todd, the Superintendent of Telegraphs, had indicated that the line would ensure few specific benefits for South Australia. He had estimated that the line would cost about £120,000 to construct, but would yield only £8,250 each year, 'or a little more than the cost of maintenance, leaving the interest on first outlay unprovided for'.

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10 GRG, 24/6, 404/70, PRO.
12 South Australian Hansard, 27 May 1870, col. 4.
13 GRG, 45, 238/70, PRO; SAPP, 24-1870/71, p.3.
However, the government persisted, and once agreement was reached with the B.A.T. Company, Charles Todd was charged with overseeing the construction of the land-line across the continent. By any measure this became one of the major feats of construction in nineteenth century Australia.

Originally Todd intended that government parties should erect all of the Overland Telegraph, but local interests were eager to tender and be involved in the enterprise.

He finally determined to construct the Overland Telegraph in three sections. Contractors, Dalwood and Darwent were given the task of erecting the line 800 kms south from Port Darwin, and were encouraged to continue further south, if possible, with financial incentives in excess of their contract price. Edward Meade Bagot was awarded the 800 km section north from Port Augusta. Government parties were organised to build the central section that was further divided into five subsections, with separate parties of about twenty-five men under a government officer given responsibility for these.

Finally, a survey party, under the control of the experienced bushman John Ross, a colonist since 1837, was given the task of surveying the route for the telegraph, and improving upon Stuart's route, if that was possible.

Little time was lost before work on the construction of the telegraph began. Ross was in the field by August, and late in the same month the first of the government construction parties left Adelaide to meet him near Mount Margaret, 960 kilometres north of Adelaide. Darwent and Dalwood's men, numbering seventy-nine, left for Palmerston by steamer on 20 August, and Bagot was ready to begin early in September.

Construction of most of the telegraph line was accomplished with no undue difficulty. The government parties completed their portions of the telegraph within the time limit, and Bagot completed his section at the end of March 1872. But while construction of the southern sections of the telegraph progressed satisfactorily, difficulties beset the contractors Dalwood and Darwent. Their difficulties almost ruined the enterprise.
Work in the north began with all the enthusiasm that had characterized the colony's embarkation on the project. The *Omeo*, with Dalwood and Darwent's men aboard, arrived at Palmerston early in September 1870. Within a week, on 15 September, the first pole was erected, by the end of November, 145 kilometres of the line were poled and wired. Then the wet season set in, and difficulties commenced. After having poled about 355 kilometres, and wired 200 kilometres, the contractors could proceed no further because of the waterlogged countryside. Laden wagons could not move; and the men, without sufficient stores, were reduced to dire straits. Then, in May 1872 when the wet was drawing to a close, William McMinn, the government-appointed overseer of the northern section, cancelled the contract of Dalwood and Darwent. But, rather than proceeding single-mindedly with the work during the dry season, McMinn and forty of the men returned to Adelaide.

On 13 July, R.C. Patterson, the resident engineer of railways, was appointed to head a construction team to salvage the work on the northern section. The government remained confident that the telegraph would be completed with little delay.

However, ill-fortune dogged these latest efforts. Little had been done during the dry season. While the wet halted the contractors' progress, the intense dry slowed Patterson's efforts, when valuable time was lost sinking wells. The onset of the wet, in November, completed Patterson's nightmare.

The government hurriedly organized reinforcements. Todd personally took charge of this party, and sailed north with a steamer of light draught that could proceed up the Roper, and thereby obviate a trek of 320 kilometres from Palmerston to the construction site. But until the wet had finished, nothing could be done.

In November 1871, the submarine cable was landed at Port Darwin, but the overland link with Adelaide was not completed nor was it likely within six months. According to the terms of the agreement made between the BAT Company and the South Australian government, the

14 Mrs Dominic Daly, *Digging, Squatting and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia*, (Sampson Low, London, 1887), p.103.

15 *SAPP, 130-1871.*
company was now free to offer to any other colony the right to join its communication system to the cable. However, the failure of the cable east of Java meant that any plans to do so were frustrated. Before the cable was repaired, the ends of the overland line were joined near Frew's Ironstone Ponds on August 22, 1872.16

South Australia had its overland telegraph between Port Augusta and Port Darwin. At its completion there were twelve telegraph stations along the line.17 Each station in the interior was staffed by six men, and each had a supply of livestock for work and food. They were to become veritable oases for overland travellers.

While the Overland Telegraph was more expensive to erect than Todd had anticipated few South Australians were unduly concerned. Once Port Darwin was made the terminus of both the overseas cable and the landline, its permanence was assured, even though Palmerston might become no more than a telegraph station.

Moreover, the discovery of gold about 193 kilometres south of Palmerston by telegraph construction workers in 1871 offered the hope that the northern capital might reflect some of the prosperity of Melbourne twenty years earlier.

Early Palmerston

During 1873 soon after the completion of the Overland Telegraph, and during the gold rush that it had promoted, J.A.G. Little, the Sub-Collector of Customs wrote that 'Palmerston is improving very rapidly and so is Southport. Building going up everywhere in anticipation of a busy and prosperous year'.18 Nine months later, the Northern Territory Times remarked that 'everything is dull, awaiting the issue of events ... A few large stores, however, are being erected'.19 At the height of the gold boom, Palmerston boasted seven stores and seven public houses. later reduced to only three stores and two public houses. The latter were judged 'fairly good for this place [i.e. Palmerston] but

17 SAPP, 29-1873, p.5.
18 Little to C. Todd, Todd Papers, ML, 49/140.
19 Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette, 9 January 1874.
second rate if placed in comparison with an average country public-house in the South.20

Palmerston was a makeshift town for many years. In 1874, when the town had a population of about three hundred persons, there was 'not a single yard of road . . . even roughly formed on the streets as they appear on paper'.21 Water for consumption and sanitary purposes was obtained from the wells which were located about the town; the native women were prevailed upon to carry the water from the wells to the white residences.22 Official and residential accommodation for government employees was very spartan. The land office was 'a mere shanty of poles', and the doctor's residence was 'another hut of poles'.23 It can be inferred that private accommodation was no more lavish. J.A.G. Knight claimed that 'all the best stores and most of the private dwellings are built of imported wood'.24 This material was very prone to white ant destruction, and there are innumerable tales of the havoc which was wrought by these pests.25

The squalid appearance of Palmerston was largely because few of the private inhabitants had secure tenure of their dwellings - many were merely squatters. In 1882, there were 1,019 half-acre blocks in the township: only forty private blocks were occupied, and of these, only four were owned by those who resided upon them.26 Most of those who bought Northern Territory allotments had no intention of settling on them, yet they made it difficult for those who wished to do so. Some of them required £150 or £200 for an annual lease on their allotments. After representations by Palmerston residents to the government to remedy the situation, an area of land was surveyed at Fannie Bay where settlers could take up allotments. However, the gold boom collapsed, many diggers left the Territory, and the blocks were never put on sale.
The Transcontinental Railway

Palmerston survived the collapse of the gold boom because it remained the terminus of the submarine cable and the centre of the government administration for the Territory. Many southerners also hoped that it would become the terminus of a railway that would span the continent and expedite travel from Australia to Europe just as the Overland Telegraph had revolutionised telecommunications.

Construction of the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway - envisaged as the northern end of a transcontinental line from Adelaide to Palmerston - represented the largest single investment made by South Australian governments in the Northern Territory during the period in which they exercised control over the region. The railway was regarded by its supporters as the surest means of encouraging the economic success of the Territory. They claimed that it would guarantee this success by lowering transport costs which apparently retarded the mining and pastoral industries, by facilitating communication between Adelaide and the north, and by attracting an increased population to north and central Australia.

The idea of a transcontinental railway was not a capricious one. Proponents argued that a transcontinental railway from north to south would serve to link Adelaide with the markets of the East, as well as to tap the apparently abundant resources of the Northern Territory. The idea appealed to government ministers for reasons similar to those which inspired the construction of the Overland Telegraph; the railway would closely bind the northern dependency to South Australia, and it would ensure the ascendency of South Australian interests in the development of the north.

During 1882, J.L. Parsons led a parliamentary delegation on a visit to the Territory, and became convinced of the Territory's potential for greatness, provided that a railway was constructed to help realize this. On his return to Adelaide he actively worked for such a railway. The opening of a railway 320 kilometres north from Port Augusta aided his cause by keeping railway developments in the colony before the public

27  GRG, 1, 381/04, PRO.
28 Defending the Northern Gateway

gaze. At the official opening of this railway on 17 May 1882, the government of which Parsons was a member 'availed ... itself of the opportunity to announce a Railway Policy for extending the line across the Continent'.30 Almost immediately, the government took steps to freeze the sale and leasing of that Territory land which might be required for railway purposes.31

On 17 July 1883, Parsons introduced 'a Bill for an Act to provide for the formation of a line of railway from Palmerston to Pine Creek'. P.B. Coglin weighed in behind Parsons, claiming that the railway 'would develop the Northern Territory just as the trans-continental railway had developed America'.32 His ignorance was monumental, but it was typical of the majority who supported the bill. There were some opponents, but these few 'jeremiashs' made no impression on the optimism of the railway's supporters. The bill was passed quickly. Immediately, another survey team was sent north, and a bill was approved so that a loan to finance the project might be raised. The onset of depression in South Australia following a severe drought in the north of the colony in 1884 prompted the government to hasten slowly, but tenders for the work were called in May 1885.

In marked contrast to many other Territory enterprises, construction of the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway met with little ill-fortune. It was completed by October 1889, nineteen months before the deadline of May 1891. Some preliminary earthworks had been carried out in the vicinity of Palmerston, as a measure of outdoor relief for the local unemployed,33 but little was done before the first of the contractors' gangs began work in August 1886. Work was forced to cease during the wet seasons, and some delay was caused by the great number of rivers and floodways which had to be bridged, but these delays were not serious. Few major accidents jeopardized the work; the only fatal one occurred during 1889, when two Chinese coolies were killed in a collision involving a locomotive and some wagons.

The secret of the contractors' success was the great number of workers employed. At one time there were 369 Europeans and 2,970

30 GRG, 2/6, 27/82, PRO.
31 Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette, 24 June 1882.
32 South Australian Hansard, 22 August, 1882, col. 876.
33 GRG, 1, 124/86, 179/86, PRO.
Chinese and Indian coolies employed on the project, together with a great
number of draught animals. However, their methods enabled the
contractors to provide a regular goods and passenger service between
Palmerston and Adelaide River, 112 kilometres to the south, by July
1888. By the end of the year, the service was extended to Burrundie, 198
kilometres south of Palmerston. Finally on 1 October 1889, the
completed railway was handed over to the South Australian
government.

The railway returned a profit in each of the years from 1890 to
1895, though this was not enough to make much of an impression upon
loan interest payments. The future of the Territory's railway remained as
gloomy as that of the Territory itself. It was conceived and built as the
most northern section of a great transcontinental line, and it made little
sense except as part of this grand scheme. There was no guarantee that
the great trunk route would have been profitable, but the smaller
Palmerston to Pine Creek line could not have been so for any length of
time, because of the poor country through which it passed. Yet by 1889,
with the onset of economic recession in South Australia immediate plans
for completion of the transcontinental line were shelved.

Attitudes to Near Neighbours

Although the northern capital of their colony was closer to many
of the major cities of Asia than their own, South Australians thought
little about the implications, except that these cities might provide
markets for Northern Territory exports, and transit stops for travellers to
Europe who might avail themselves of the transcontinental railway. They
thought very little about the people to their north, except perhaps for the
Chinese. They shared with their fellow colonists a fear borne of
ignorance of the Chinese, many of whom had come to Australia at the
time of the gold rushes of the 'fifties. They were concerned with the
effects that numbers of Chinese had on mining and commerce, but not
immediately with threats to their security.

Yet in spite of the general attitude to the Chinese many were
brought to the Territory.

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34 SAPP, 28-1889, p.12.
35 GRG, 1, 783/89, PRO.
Fundamental to South Australian ideas for the development of the Territory was the suitability of plantation agriculture, particularly sugar, cotton and rice. A corollary of this idea was that European labour could not be employed profitably in the tropics and that suitable - cheap - labour could only be forthcoming from the region to the north of Australia. As a consequence, from 1874 to 1877 successive South Australian governments went to considerable lengths to entice alien settlers to the region to establish small-scale farming communities there:36 no consideration was given to the employment of indigenous people.

One of the more interesting, in view of later developments, concerned negotiations with Japanese. In July 1876 Wilton Hack, a Christian missionary working in Japan, but at that time visiting Adelaide, proposed to encourage the migration of his converts to the Northern Territory.37 The government was a little wary of such a scheme, and expressed only guarded interest in the suggestion. It did no more than encourage Hack to visit the Northern Territory so that he might be able to publicize its resources in Japan. At no time did South Australian governments support a scheme for Japanese migration to the Northern Territory. The suggestion that Hack should present himself to the Japanese government, to determine its attitude to the emigration of Japanese nationals, was his own. So too was the colonization scheme that he later presented to the Japanese authorities. This scheme had not been authorized by the South Australian government,38 which had looked upon Hack’s suggestions as nothing more than an opportunity for advertising the Northern Territory.39 In its view, the Japanese were able to take advantage of the Territory’s land regulations along with all aspiring migrants anywhere. But any migration from Japan at that time was impossible. Hack was informed bluntly by authorities in Japan that ‘all emigration of the Japanese, out of the Empire will be resisted by the Government’.40

38 GRG, 1, 286/76, 508/77, GRS, 4, 406/76, PRO.
39 South Australian Hansard, 13 September 1876, col. 1106.
40 GRG, 1, 489/77, PRO.
In the event, the Chinese, whom southern Australians did not want, were the only people who seemed willing to enter the Northern Territory in great numbers, and they were the only ones to succeed in there.

The first indentured Chinese were brought from Singapore to the Territory in 1874 to work on the gold-fields to support the ailing mining companies.\(^41\) In February 1876, at the expiration of their contracts, about 160 of the coolies elected to remain in the Territory and to work on the gold-fields on their own account. Several months later, at the end of 1877, the first Chinese arrived in the Territory directly from Hong Kong. They, too, hoped to exploit the Territory's gold-fields. And by mid-1878 the Chinese in the Territory outnumbered the Europeans. They continued to do so for the remainder of the time that South Australia exercised control over the region even though legislation in 1888 forbade the entry of more Chinese to the Territory.

Because of the general anti-Chinese sentiment of the Australian colonists, it is of interest that the Chinese should have been permitted to assume such a preponderance in the Northern Territory. Yet they were the only aliens who were willing to work in the Territory. They were tolerated so long as they did so, and so long as they presented no serious competition to Europeans; and this, despite increased Chinaphobia in the neighbouring colonies.

However, if numbers of Asians could not be brought to the Northern Territory to foster agriculture, numbers of them did so under their own terms in pursuit of pearl shell. The first discoveries of pearl shell in the vicinity of Port Darwin were made in 1884, however, little came of this. The marginal nature of the beds and the licence fees imposed by the government meant that they preferred to fish the richer beds about Broome in the west and Thursday Island in the east.\(^42\) However, interest revived again after 1892 when licence fees were reduced, and Port Darwin thereafter continued to be home to a pearling fleet.

The Northern Territory pearling industry was never a very profitable one, but it continued to be viable. It remained in Asian hands and was dominated by the Japanese. In 1909 there were 158 men in


Palmerston engaged in pearling and trepanging: 69 of these were Japanese, 55 were Malays, 14 were Philippinos, only five were European. These people formed distinct communities at Port Darwin, but because they did not compete with European enterprise they caused little concern.

Whatever their contribution to the local economy, those engaged in the pearling and trepanging industry helped to swell the population of Palmerston, extend the local economy and thereby consolidate the establishment of the northern settlement. During the latter years of the nineteenth century, Palmerston remained a small town, isolated from the settled areas of southern Australia. Although it was a cosmopolitan town, it was fundamentally Anglo-Saxon. Moreover, its permanence, if not its prosperity, seemed assured because it was the landfall of the submarine cable and the terminus of the land-line to Adelaide and because it was the centre for the government administration of the Territory. Because of the importance of the telecommunications link with Europe, Palmerston and the Top End began to figure in discussions concerned with the defence of continental Australia during the latter years of the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER 3

DEFENDING THE NORTH, 1885-1901

For several decades after the foundation of South Australia the question of defence and foreign policy seemed remote and irrelevant as colonists struggled to establish an outpost of British civilisation in an alien and often inhospitable environment.¹ Local defence forces were organised, but permanent fortifications were an expense that colonists could ill afford at the time when attention was directed to the establishment of more fundamental public works such as roads and railways and water resources. Moreover, the colonists felt safe under the protection of the British fleet and the British garrison which was quartered in Adelaide. This attitude was reinforced by the sense of isolation from Europe produced by the immense difficulties of communication. The problems and crises of Europe seemed far removed from the daily lives of the colonists.

Throughout this period of relative tranquility, colonists considered the external security of the Australian colonies to be an Imperial responsibility. Great Britain's naval and military predominance was undisputed, and none doubted that she would protect her colonies, no matter how distant. Indeed, until 1870 the presence of British troops in the colonies gave positive proof of Britain's intentions to protect them. Only after several of the colonies had been granted self-government was pressure brought to bear on them to assume greater responsibility for their own defence.² In accordance with the resolution of the House of Commons in March 1862, which set a timetable for the withdrawal of British troops, the last of the Imperial troops, ninety-two men of the 18th (Royal Irish) Regiment, left South Australia on 17 August, 1870.

Regardless of the presence of the Imperial troops, colonists had early assumed limited responsibility for local defence, and as early as 1846, South Australia's Governor Robe considered proposals for the

defence of Port Adelaide. In that year Captain Frome, R.E., the Colony's Surveyor-General, and Captain I. Twiss. R.E., who was at the time visiting South Australia, selected a site for a gun battery on Torrens Island. Nothing came of this recommendation, but the question of the best means of defending the colony's main port remained a central issue in defence planning for the following four decades.

The Crimean War persuaded the colonists to take the question of local defence more seriously. In 1854 the South Australian Governor, Sir Henry Young, appointed a commission under the Colonial Secretary, Boyle Travers Finniss, to 'enquire and report upon certain precautionary measures of defence... in the event of... war'

This first Finniss Report\(^3\) was the first comprehensive review of South Australia's defence requirements and set the pattern for future defence studies in the colony. The first line of defence remained the responsibility of the Imperial Navy whose role was the protection of Empire shipping and the interception and dispersal on the high seas of any foreign naval flotilla bent on attacking the colonies or disrupting inter-colonial commerce. Colonial forces, in conjunction with the small Imperial Garrison, then stationed in Adelaide, together with a field battery which had been given to the colony in 1847, were to provide all local and coastal defence necessary to repulse any single raider or small force that might slip past the Royal Navy.

Each of South Australia's many subsequent defence reviews and all the recommendations made by local or visiting naval and military experts reiterated the basic features of the Finniss Commission. Initially the emphasis was on the raising and deployment of mobile forces, and in 1854 steps were taken to raise a volunteer military force. From the mid-seventies until about 1890, emphasis shifted to the need for fixed coastal defences in conjunction with naval forces. During the nineties, after forts were built at Semaphore (1880) and Largs Bay (1885), defence theories once again emphasised the utility of mobile land forces.

Lt-Col. Freeling, R.E., recommended the establishment of a permanent military force in a report to the South Australian government in 1866. At that time no further initiatives were taken. However, when commissioned to report on the colony's defences Sir W.F.D. Jervois, R.E. and Major P. Scratchley, R.E. reiterated the recommendation in their

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\(^3\) *South Australian Parliamentary Paper*, 89-1858.
Defending the North

report to the government in 1878. Colonel M.F. Downes, who had been appointed commandant of South Australia's forces in 1877, soon thereafter submitted cost estimates for a small permanent force. Nothing was done immediately, but in November, 1878, the government passed the Military Forces Act, which provided for the raising of the first permanent body of troops, together with the organisation of a reserve force.

Most of these initiatives were concerned solely with the protection of the capital of South Australia and its port. However, some attention was also given to the fortification of the northern capital at Port Darwin. During this period many colonists had become disturbed at apparent German designs to extend its empire in the Pacific, and on 4 April 1883, with the support of southern colonies, Queensland took possession of New Guinea in the name of the Queen, though it was disallowed by Britain on 2 June and another three years passed before an agreement concerning control of Papua and New Guinea was struck between Britain and Germany.\(^4\) In September, 1886, following the call for an enquiry that would help to emphasise the commercial potential of Port Darwin, Ebenezer Ward moved in Parliament that the Governor,

\[\ldots\text{communicate to the Imperial Government the opinion of this House that the magnificent natural harbour of Port Darwin, centrally situated on the northern coast of the Australian continent, affords the best obtainable position for an Imperial arsenal and fortifications for the defence alike of the interests of the British Empire in the Pacific Ocean and of Australasia in relation thereto; and also that this House is willing to sanction any cession of land or to afford any other facilities that the Imperial Government may require for the erection and maintenance of such arsenal and fortifications.}\(^5\)

There was no argument in Parliament, and the motion was carried.

However, while the request was couched in defence terms, it seems that the South Australians were not so much concerned with defence matters, Imperial or Australian, as with inducing the Royal Navy

\(^4\) Bissaker, pp.13-6.
\(^5\) South Australian Hansard, 29 September 1886, col. 1142.
to invest in facilities at Port Darwin and thereby provide another financial base that would help secure its future. The South Australians were prepared to provide everything for the Royal Navy except a financial commitment.

In support of their case to the Colonial Office, the South Australians included an assessment of Port Darwin by Captain J.P. Maclear of H.M.S. *Flying Fish*. Maclear said of Port Darwin

Port Darwin is of great importance as the terminus of the Australian telegraph cable, and in time of war it would be necessary to defend this either by keeping one or two corvettes in the neighbourhood, or by batteries erected at the entrance of the harbor. It may also become the terminus of a great transcontinental railway.

...Port Darwin would prove a valuable station for protecting the China and Australian trade in time of war; the harbor is very good, and could well be protected by batteries on the Government reserves at the entrance points. At present all coal is stored on board the E. and A. Company's hulk, generally less than 500 tons, ... The nearest coal stations are Kupang, in Timor, distance 450 miles, where coal can be obtained at the maximum rate of fifty to sixty tons per day, and at Thursday Island, distance 730 miles, where there is a coal hulk. ... As an arsenal Port Darwin is the only suitable place that I am aware of in North Australia, and for that it is very well adapted; ...6

The War Office was not swayed by the arguments and did 'not consider the strategic position of Port Darwin, or its natural advantages, to be such as to warrant its adoption as an Imperial defended station'.

Rear Admiral, Sir George Tryon, appointed Commander of the Australian Squadron in December 1884, was the one asked to adjudicate. His reply reflected the thinking of the Admiralty at the time about the defence of Australia.

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6 *S.A.P.P.*, 105-1887, p.2.
Defending the North

As to the comparative advantages of Port Darwin and Thursday Island for an arsenal and a protected coaling station; and, I add, as a check to the enterprise of an enemy, I am of opinion that the strategic value of Thursday Island is infinitely greater than that of Port Darwin. The precise value of Port Darwin is in the womb of the future; the value of Thursday Island is of immediate and pressing importance to the trade and commerce of Australia.

I hold Thursday Island to be of the first strategic importance to the defence of trade and commerce in Australasian seas. The naval and military occupation of the position would release the mass of the squadron to the better protection of the southern routes to Australian and New Zealand ports.

... While every other position can be avoided or passed by an enemy, the Torres Straits can be watched and guarded far more effectively than it is possible to do the same at Gibraltar; they cannot be passed at night. The distance between Port Darwin and Thursday Island is over 700 miles, and, in my opinion, it would be most unwise to contemplate making defensive works there till, at all events, far more important points are dealt with.

Port Darwin may be said to be about half way on the length of the northern coast of Australia. It is considerably to the south of the line of trade and commerce. So far as trade is concerned, almost everything is in the future; it is an outlet to a new country; it doubtless will increase in importance, but to what extent no one can foresee.

It has doubtless an importance attached to it due to its being one of the termini of the telegraph cable that connects Australia and Europe; but I fail to see the necessity of fortifying the place where a cable happens to emerge from the sea, when it can be interrupted almost everywhere on its long length.

Such is the growth of the Empire, and such is the energy of our colonies, that almost each year gives birth to a call for protection for some new position. I hold we should urge the protection of those positions...
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which are of the greatest strategic importance; if this is effected they will directly cover and protect other places.7

Despite the lack of success, the South Australians tried again three years later after they determined not to proceed with the construction of a third coastal fort at Glenelg. The suggestion was made in parliament that communication be opened up with the Imperial Government and the sister colonies, with the object of ascertaining whether a fort (for which might be utilised the guns now lying at Glenelg) should not be erected at Port Darwin, as a depot in connection with a scheme for national defence, thereby turning to profitable account the heavy expenditure incurred in the purchase of the guns.8 The motion, with all references to the Glenelg guns being deleted, passed without argument. However, the suggestion went no further.

New Defence acts pertaining to South Australia were passed in 1886, 1890 and 1895, but they did not alter the essential arrangement established in 1878. Until Defence became a Commonwealth responsibility, the artillery comprised the only permanent South Australian Military Force. Other units of South Australia's defence force were militiamen and volunteers: there were no troops in the Northern Territory.

Intercolonial Defence Initiatives

Although local defence was the responsibility of each colony there was an increasing realisation that some matters, particularly relations with the British War Office and Admiralty could be handled more efficiently in concert. In particular, there were successive calls for increased co-operation following the 1878 reports to several colonies by Colonel Sir W.F.D. Jervois. The matter was considered again at the Military Defences Inquiry Commission in Sydney in 1881. Finally, a measure of co-operation was attained in 1885 with the establishment of the Colonial Defence Committee, to co-ordinate colonial responses to the War Office and Admiralty.9

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7 Report dated 26 July 1887, in S.A.P.P., 105-1887, p.3.
8 South Australian Hansard, 9 October 1889, col. 1167.
Defence debate in the colonies was also given increased impetus by the 1882 report of the Royal Commission on the Defence of British Possessions and Commerce Abroad. This report largely endorsed the views already put by Jervois and Scratchley.

While the establishment of the Colonial Defence Committee was concerned to facilitate communications with Britain there was also a growing realisation in the colonies that other matters required greater cooperation.

Already at the first session of the Federal Council of Australia in 1886 a resolution was carried advocating the creation of an armed strategic harbour at King Georges Sound. However, discussion of the wider ramifications for the defence of the Australian colonies at the Colonial Conference in London in 1887 on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee led to an increase in the Australia Squadron and the provision of defences at Thursday Island in the Torres Strait to guard the eastern approaches to Australia as well as those at King Georges Sound in Western Australia to guard the approaches to the south: the British Royal Commission of 1882 had not identified Port Darwin as a port of particular significance.

The decision to establish the defence bases at Thursday Island and King Georges Sound was a significant one, because of the idea that each colony should contribute towards the cost on the basis of its population.

Although South Australia extended to the northern coast of the continent and was not called upon to fortify its northern capital the colony was not required to help finance the base at Thursday Island: this was borne by New South Wales, Victoria Queensland and Western Australia. However, South Australia did help contribute towards the cost of the base at King Georges Sound. Western Australia bore 1/4 of the cost of the base with New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia making good the rest.

The Agreement for the defence of King Georges Sound was drawn up in 1893 with South Australia being asked to raise the first garrison for the fortification.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} AAC, A571/1, 2/3342.
Although the Admiralty had not considered Port Darwin to be a port of strategic significance, South Australians took the opportunity of the negotiations concerning the establishment of fortifications at Thursday Island and King Georges Sound to insist that the merits of Port Darwin also be considered.

The Colonial Defence Committee had already considered the role that Port Darwin might play in Australia's defence and largely echoed the views of the Admiralty. To the members generally, the main concern was, first, the defence of the settled areas in the south-east of the continent, and secondly, that of the main trade routes serving the major ports in the south. There seemed little need to take significant measures to protect the tiny community at Port Darwin:

... all present requirements will be met by the provision of a small defence for the landing place for the cable. Port Darwin may eventually become a considerable commercial harbor, and might then claim protection on a moderate scale; but as a strategic point it can never assume the importance of Torres Straits. Moreover, the cables, from their geographical position, are necessarily vulnerable, and must depend mainly for their defence on Her Majesty's navy; so that the protection of the shore is relatively of less moment than that of other cables which it would be difficult to injure except at the landing places.11

Nevertheless the South Australians insisted that the Committee of Officers sent to report upon Thursday Island should also visit and report upon Port Darwin. It proved to be to no avail. Even the ready availability of the two 9.2 inch guns at Glenelg failed to make the fortification of Port Darwin an attractive proposition:

... it has been suggested that two 9.2 inch B.L. guns with hydro-pneumatic mountings, now at Adelaide, should be transferred to Port Darwin, and mounted on suitable sites, but the committee consider that such a course is altogether unnecessary; it would be a very costly proceeding, and would necessitate a permanent

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11 Quoted in a letter from the premier of Victoria to that of South Australia, dated 19 December 1890, in S.A.P.P., 104-1891, p.4.
artillery force of highly trained men being always maintained.

Small Population Eligible for Local Force. - In view of the small and annually decreasing population of Europeans, of whom there are now only about 100 males between the ages of 18 and 40, the utmost the committee feel justified in recommending for the present would be a very simple form of defence to protect the landing-place of the cable, and to guard against the telegraph station being surprised for the purpose of transmitting false information. As it would no doubt be considered necessary in time of war or imminent danger thereof to station a very fast vessel at Port Darwin to transmit or obtain information (the cables being cut at sea), the small defence recommended would enable her if necessary to run in under its protection.

So long as things remain in their present condition the committee cannot advise that any permanent force of artillery or defensive works should be maintained or constructed, as there is no place from which reinforcements can be quickly procured in time of danger the personnel for the protection of the place will have to be obtained locally. Under these circumstances they recommend...

1. Armament. - That two rifled field guns, two five-barrel Nordenfelts, and 100 Martini-Henry rifles, with suitable supplies of ammunition, be provided for the defence of the telegraph station and channels of approach; and that a second telegraph station be arranged inland, in case that at Palmerston were destroyed.

2. Personnel. - That the present rifle club be expanded into a defence force of sixty or seventy Europeans under the partially paid system, and drilled and instructed in the use of field artillery, machine guns, and rifles; also, that some thirty or forty Chinese be enrolled to act as gun lascars. This force will be found ample for the protection of the port.12

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Nothing was done to implement the report.

**Expert Advice**

Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century numbers of British military experts were called upon to advise the colonial governments of their defences. This established a pattern that was to persist for many decades. At this time it was certainly necessary because the advice was not available in the Australian colonies, but it established attitudes towards the worth of the British advice - not always totally appropriate in the Australian situation - that were to persist for a long time and frustrate attempts to devise more independent policies appropriate to conditions in Australia and the neighbourhood.

Following the Colonial Conference held in London in 1887, Major-General Bevan Edwards, at that time commanding British troops in China and Hong Kong, was asked to report on Australia's defences. His 1889 Report was one of the first to make particular mention of Port Darwin and to highlight the need for general developmental projects. His report said in part:

> No general defence of Australia can be undertaken unless its distant parts are connected with the more populous colonies in the south and east of the continent. If an enemy was established in either Western Australia or at Port Darwin, you would be powerless to act against him. Their isolation is therefore, a menace to the rest of Australia, and the loss of the latter would cut off all telegraphic communication with the rest of the world, ... The interests of the whole continent, therefore demand that the railways to connect Port Darwin and Western Australia with the other colonies should be made as soon as possible.\(^{13}\)

His was a particularly significant report, not for what it said about the defence of northern Australia, but rather because of a firm recommendation for unified action by the several colonies. It was later

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\(^{13}\) Report dated 9 October 1889, in *S.A.P.P. 118A-1889*, p.3.
used by Premier Henry Parkes of New South Wales as an argument for the federation of the Australian colonies.14

The spirit of inter-colonial co-operation, so frequently urged by experts like Edwards, was taken a stage further in 1894 when a general Scheme of Defence for Australia and Tasmania was drawn up. Two years later in December, 1896 an Intercolonial Military Conference comprising the commanding officers of each of the colonial forces met in Melbourne. Here 'The question of the defence of the cable-landing places at Port Darwin and Roebuck Bay was raised, and recommendations were made on various matters of military administration'.15

The question of the defence of continental Australia was an important one during the latter years of the nineteenth century, and one of the early concerns that promoted discussion about the advisability of federating the several colonies. Regardless of the discussions of the politicians, and the fate of the Federation movement, there was increasing cooperation between the military leaders of the several colonies which promoted united policies, if not united forces.

The increasing unanimity amongst the colony's military leaders was facilitated by the fact that they all espoused the same fundamental policy of defence, the same one that had infused all discussions on the defence of each colony. It remained based on the principle that the security of the colonies collectively, and that of Australian trade, was guaranteed by British naval supremacy that would prevent any large-scale attack by a hostile power. All that the colonies needed was a local defence sufficient to combat attacks from one or two cruisers that might elude the Royal Navy.

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14 Bissaker, pp.20-1.

CHAPTER 4

COMMONWEALTH PERIOD, 1901-29

With the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 the new commonwealth government assumed responsibility for the defence of continental Australia. Because of increasing concern about Australia's open North it was perhaps fortuitous that the same government should also assume responsibility for the Northern Territory ten years later.

In the minds of many Government leaders and others, continental Australia remained vulnerable to invasion so long as the north remained largely undeveloped and sparsely populated. Thus, to many the question of the defence of north Australia was synonymous with that of its economic development. Because of this identification, concern about the lack of development in the Northern Territory grew during the twentieth century as the world balance of power changed.

Of particular concern to Australians during this period was the expansionist policy of Japan and the changing balance of power in the Pacific region.

However, regardless of the changes, Australia's defence policy during the early years of the twentieth century differed little from that pursued by the individual colonies throughout the previous century. As Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson remarked in a report to the government on 1 March, 1911 it remained based on two assumptions:

(a) That the Sea supremacy of the Empire will be maintained, though some period may elapse after the outbreak of hostilities before the Command of the Sea becomes effective.
(b) That the Naval Forces in Australian waters will be of sufficient strength to preclude an enemy who attempts invasion on a large scale from evading them during such a period.

The Commonwealth Naval Forces will, therefore, be required to share in attaining (a), to fulfil (b), and also to render protection on the high seas to merchant
shipping, upon which the commerce, and therefore, the prosperity, of Australia depend.\(^1\)

In the period after World War I this policy was based four square on the premise that British naval supremacy would be exercised from a fortified base in Singapore.

**National Defence**

The need to defend their continent was one of the concerns that infused early discussion about the federation of the several Australian colonies.\(^2\)

Immediately after Federation the new Commonwealth government assumed control of the continent's defence and the transfer of the colonial forces was made in March, 1901. For several years thereafter the chief concern of those responsible for Australia's defence was the organisation of the new national force. Though only a land force, the task was a daunting one.

In his Second Annual Report, dated 1 May, 1904 Major-General Sir Edward Hutton, the first Commandant of the Commonwealth Military Forces, painted a grim picture.

> It may be as well to state at once that a force of the requisite strength organized and capable of taking the field does not at present exist in Australia, and that there are at present no local means of equipping such a force. The organisation is incomplete; the departments necessary for a mobile Army have yet to be created; and there are neither sufficient guns, arms, equipment, nor ammunition available.\(^3\)

The situation was the more disturbing because of developments in the region to the north of Australia, and the emergence of Japan as a military power bent on expanding its sphere of influence.

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Britain and Japan had signed a treaty on 11 February 1902 and with renewals in 1905 and 1911 it effectively remained in force until 1921. However, Japan flexing its military muscles was seen as a matter of concern in Australia. In 1904 Hutton observed,

It is impossible to view the military situation in Australia, in face of the momentous changes taking place in the balance of power in the East, without grave misgivings. The victories of the Japanese arms within the last four months have astounded the whole civilised world by their brilliancy and by their astonishing rapidity. The furore and far reaching results of the war have yet to be felt, but it is safe to predict that the opening up of China will follow as a result which together with the opening of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama will materially alter the existing political and commercial situation in the Pacific.4

The speed with which the Japanese fleet defeated that of Tsarist Russia in 1905, underscored the success with which Japan had fashioned a modern war machine.

The Japanese victory, and the speed with which it was gained, proved to be a turning point in the development of Australia's defence policy. Hitherto Australians had been complacent, safe behind the Royal Navy shield. But the Far Eastern Squadron had been withdrawn in 1904 to counter the growing German fleet. Afterwards an increasing number of Australians became concerned at their nation's vulnerability regardless of the protection that might be afforded by the Royal Navy. Alfred Deakin was one of those.

Against the advice of many military advisers, and that of the Committee of Imperial Defence, who considered the emerging Australian fears to be unnecessarily alarmist, Deakin, and an increasing number of supporters, urged the formation of the Australian Navy. In the period of after 1905 they also succeeded in introducing compulsory military service - in 1911 - and in establishing a General Staff in 1909.5

The concern with which an increasing number of Australians came to view developments to their north was evident in the development of the Royal Australian Navy.

For a long while the Admiralty opposed the establishment of dominion navies fearing that this would weaken its control. However, because of Australia's insistence, and with assurances that an Australian Navy would come under the direct control of the Admiralty in time of war, an independent Royal Australian Navy was established in 1909: in 1914 it comprised a battle-cruiser, three light cruisers, six destroyers and two submarines.

In order to ensure that this new navy would be compatible with the Royal Navy, Admiral Sir Reginald Henderson was appointed in 1910 to advise the Australian Government. His brief was primarily concerned with the development of Naval facilities, and he urged first, a central naval base to be located at Sydney and a number of secondary bases in other parts of the continent. By this time the Australian government had already decided upon a fleet of thirteen vessels, but Henderson envisaged a fleet of fifty-two vessels by 1933.

In his plan, Port Darwin was to form part of the Western division, which included the north-west coast, and was to be developed as a secondary base for destroyers and submarines, and was to be equipped with a high powered wireless station once suitable equipment was available. Henderson said of Port Darwin:

Port Darwin is a good harbour, and occupies a very strategic position. It should develop gradually into as important a base as, say, Hong Kong, possessing Docks, (either Floating or Graving) capable of recovering the largest ships and machine shops, &c, adequate for carrying out any repairs to war-ships. Later, at Port Darwin there should also be maintained reserves of coal, oil, and naval stores and provisions.

However, he pointed out that the lack of development in the Territory precluded this work being done immediately.

Owing to the lack of proper land communications and of population, no steps can be recommended to be taken
Defending the Northern Gateway

at Port Darwin at present; but when the north to south transcontinental railway line is completed, Port Darwin's position will be valuable, and measures should then be put in hand to make it a useful Naval Base.

In the interim it should be utilized by the Fleet as an anchorage, the Fleet providing for its protection as a Base if required in war time.

A thorough survey and examination of the harbour should be undertaken forthwith, and sites for docks, dockyards, &c allocated and reserved for future developments.6

Little came of Henderson's report, primarily because of the outbreak of World War I and the consequences that flowed from it. However, land was reserved for defence purposes about Port Darwin following a report on the subject by Brigadier-General J.M. Gordon in 1913. This included Fort Hill, Stokes Hill, Point Elliott, Point Emery, part of the Larrakeyah peninsula, East Point, Myilly Point, the rifle range at Frances Bay and a site for an ordnance depot. Land at Bynoe Harbour was acquired for naval purposes in 1916, it being considered more suitable for naval purposes than Port Darwin.7

Transfer of the Territory to the Commonwealth

Federation had little effect on administration or development of the Northern Territory except that it paved the way for South Australia to shed its responsibility for the region.

Negotiations between the new federal government and that of South Australia began soon after Federation. The question of national defence and the role of the Northern Territory in this, was one of the arguments, though certainly not a major one, put forward for the federal government assuming control of the Territory.

6 C.P.P., 7-1911, p.56.
7 AAC, A659/1. 39/7985.
FIGURE 2

Northern Territory - Location Map

Yet, although the defence of northern Australia was an element in negotiations about the Territory's future, and indeed, was touted as reason why the Commonwealth should assume control of it, the question was ultimately determined by more pragmatic arguments, concerning the financial compensation that South Australia should receive, and an insistence that the transcontinental railway should be completed, for economic rather than defence reasons.

The Northern Territory Acceptance Bill was introduced into the House of Representatives on 20 July 1909. It passed that House on 17 November without amendment. The majority who supported the bill did so because they believed that northern Australia should be populated and developed by Anglo-Saxons, both to prevent an invasion by the peoples of Asia, and to ensure that the region remained part of the British Empire. They realized that the development of the region was a national undertaking, and that South Australia did not have the resources to accomplish this.

There was some opposition in the Senate, where members were concerned about the promise to complete the Transcontinental Railway, but the enabling legislation was finally passed late in 1910 with the transfer of responsibility to be effected on 1 January 1911.

The Northern Territory in 1911

The Commonwealth faced a daunting task in the Northern Territory. By 1911, there was little to show for the determined South Australian efforts to develop the region. In 1907, the value of all buildings there, both public and private, was estimated to be only £44,870. The total non-Aboriginal population in the Territory at the time of the census in April 1911 was 3,310, about half of whom lived in and about Darwin, the name of the northern capital after 3 March, 1911. Of those resident in Darwin, only 374 were European. There were few other centres of significance in the Territory at the time. Pine Creek,

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11 GRG 1, 486/07, PRO.
12 AAC, A1, 11/16191.
which had long been the centre of the Territory's premier goldfield, and the southern terminus of the Northern Australian Railway, boasted a population of only 284. The total European population of central Australia numbered 272, with only 138 being resident in the Alice Springs census region. For the rest, the European population was spread about the numerous pastoral stations and the far-flung mining fields at Arltunga, Tanami, and the district about Pine Creek.

One of the chief reasons why South Australians sought control of the Northern Territory in 1863 had been because they believed that plantation agriculture would thrive there. By 1911, the only agricultural successes had been recorded by Maurice and Nicholas Holtze at the Botanic Gardens, and several Chinese market gardeners about Palmerston and the goldfields.

The pastoral industry which, in 1863, had been expected to be the other major Territory industry and the backbone of economic development in the interior, had at least survived; indeed, it led a modest recovery in Territory export earnings during the early twentieth century.\(^\text{13}\) By 1911, there was some cause for optimism, at least among Top End pastoralists. The modest pastoral recovery after 1900 had induced the British-based Bovril Australian Estates Ltd., to purchase the Victoria River Downs Station in 1909, together with Carlton Hill and Napier Stations in Western Australia. At the same time, the company had released plans for a meat-processing works at either Wyndham or Port Darwin.

The mining industry, which had been characterized by a speculative gold boom in the eighteen seventies, and another in the last years of the nineteenth century, had been the Territory's major export earner during the nineteenth century, but it was in a period of continued decline at the time of the transfer.\(^\text{14}\) This was due directly to the steady fall in the number of Chinese miners on the fields after the passage of the Chinese Restriction Act of 1888, and was hastened by the speculative plunge in the years after 1896.

The pearling industry had been a steady export earner during the latter decades of the South Australian period, although it received little support from governments, principally because it employed so few


Europeans. In 1911, there were thirty-three boats and 146 men based at Port Darwin who were employed in the pearling and trepanging industries.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the few capital works, and the only one of potential strategic significance taken over by the Commonwealth in 1911 was the North Australian Railway, the narrow-gauge railway running south from Palmerston to Pine Creek, 233 kilometres distant.\textsuperscript{16} It had returned a slight operating profit in the years from 1890 to 1895, but at no time did it make sufficient profit to cover loan interest payments.

\section*{Under New Management}

Regardless of the value of the assets that it inherited, the federal government made every endeavour to enhance their value. In the minds of successive Ministers responsible for the Northern Territory, the questions of economic development and national defence were closely intertwined. Typical of the new resolve was the change in the name of the northern capital from Palmerston to Darwin, on 3 March, 1911, thereby eliminating considerable confusion in the minds of southerners.\textsuperscript{17}

None expressed the apparent close identity of northern development and defence more clearly than Patrick McMahon Glynn, who on 18 June 1914 outlined his government's policy for the Northern Territory.

The development of the Northern Territory, having been assumed as a Continental responsibility, must involve for a time a draft, without direct or immediate return, upon the resources of the Commonwealth. Its relation to defence, and to the maintenance of the associated policy of settlement by white races, suggests that the necessity for and justification of the expenditure of the earlier years must be determined by other than purely commercial considerations. We are within call of the myriad races of the now somewhat restless East; of

\textsuperscript{15} Administrator's Report, 1911, p.54.
\textsuperscript{17} AAC, A1, 34/7634.
peoples, whose traditions and standing are no less than ours entitled to respect, but who are more or less affected by the pressure of numbers on the limits of production and by the desire for expansion which, as being inevitable and dangerous under certain possible international conditions, has to be taken into careful and early account in laying down the lines of settlement and defence.

This consideration, if not decisive, must affect the question of what expenditure may be regarded as legitimate in reasonable efforts to expedite the settlement of the Territory. . . .

It is thought that the time is come for a comprehensive and continuing policy to be systematically applied. 18

Implicit in this policy was a determination to complete the Transcontinental Railway line, with another to be built to the Queensland border; all were to be built over an eight year period. Indeed, in any defence debate involving the Northern Territory the question of the railway brooked large. In 1910, Henderson affirmed that 'It is useless to establish works at this important place until the Transcontinental Railway is completed. On the completion of the railway, Port Darwin should be developed into a Fleet Secondary Base as the Commonwealth Fleet grows.' 19

Railway works were a fundamental part of the Northern Territory policy of the Fisher Labor government. E.L. Batchelor, the Minister for External Affairs, promised that his government would 'construct other railways [besides the transcontinental railway] to open up the country - especially to give access to the regions capable of closer settlement'. 20 As a step towards the implementation of this, the Labor government appointed a Royal Commission on 28 March 1913 to enquiry into the state of development of the Territory, and to suggest the routes of any railways, and the siting of any ports which might encourage development. It was also required to make suggestions for the location of any future capital. 21 The Cook conservative government, which succeeded that of

18 C.P.P. 30-1914, p.5.
19 C.P.P. 7-1911, p.59.
20 Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette, 18 August 1911.
21 C.P.P., 31-1914.
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Fisher on 24 June 1913, also deemed railway construction important for the development of the Territory. Patrick McMahon Glynn, the Territory's new Minister, had the commissioners abbreviate their work, but included their major recommendations in his 'Outline of Policy for the Territory' on 18 June 1914. Indeed, before the commissioners had even submitted their final report, federal parliament had passed the Pine Creek to Katherine River Railway Act (1913) which authorized the extension of the northern railway to the Katherine River.

Construction of the railway was severely hampered by the outbreak of world war, and the consequent problems and delays in obtaining necessary materials and skilled labour. However, work progressed despite the war, industrial disputes in Darwin, and political upheavals in Melbourne. The railway extensions, eighty-eight kilometres from Pine Creek to the new railhead at Emungalan, on the northern bank of the Katherine River, were completed without any undue problems other than those caused by the exigencies of the war. The work was controlled by the Engineer-in-Chief of the Commonwealth Railways. By March 1915, there were 250 men at work on the railway construction; a little more than twelve months later the number rose to 600 - most of whom were migrants. War-time shortages delayed the construction of the iron bridge over the Fergusson River, but by using a temporary wooden structure, the railway was opened for traffic on 4 December 1917 at a cost of £445,000.

Though railway construction continued, many of the federal government’s initiatives for the Northern Territory were frustrated by the onset of World War 1 with the consequent diversion of attention, man-power and finance.

World War 1

Despite the misgivings of many about the emerging Japanese militarism, and fears that Japan might take action in the Pacific should Britain and Germany become embroiled in war, the Anglo-Japanese alliance which was renewed in 1911, provided for peace in the Far East.

22 C.P.P., 30-1914, pp.7-10.
The war had a profound effect on all Australians. 'After a century of peaceful and ordered development during which rumours of distant wars had hardly troubled a quietly unmilitarist people, events on the other side of the earth suddenly brought death to practically every Australian Home'.25 Upwards of 330,000 troops went overseas, from a population of less than five million, 59,258 were killed while another 173,815 were wounded. The casualty rate of 68.5% was greater than that for the United Kingdom troops or those of Canada, or even those of Germany. Moreover, all were volunteers.26

The war also had a profound effect on the tiny European colony which was the Northern Territory in 1914. As in all other parts of Australia, the call to arms attracted 'all the adventurous roving natures that could not stay away, . . ..'27 In all, upwards of 250 went from the Northern Territory to the war.28

Many of those who remained - men and women - were no less enthusiastic in their fostering of the war effort. The Times carried lengthy reports of the war, and regularly included letters from local men who were serving at the front, thereby fanning the flames of patriotism, and loosening wallets and purse strings. Territorians were delighted to learn that Lieutenant Albert Borella, at one time an employee of the Lands Department, should have been awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in action at Villers-Bretonneux, though it is evident that he was not a well-known Territory identity.29 He had enlisted in March 1915, after going to the Territory to seek his fortune in 1913. While not a Territorian of longstanding, he was acclaimed a hero, and indeed, was the only Territorian to have been awarded the VC.

There was only a tiny military presence in Darwin during the war. A Naval Reserve Sub-district had been established there in 1911,

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26 Russel Ward, A Nation for a Continent: the history of Australia, 1901-1975, (Heinemann, Melbourne, 1977), p.120.
28 Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette, 23 June 1921.
29 Ibid., 19 October 1918.
and a small Cable Guard was raised from the local Rifle Club. There was little for either detachment to do.

In other parts of Australia, so in the Northern Territory, excesses of patriotism were accompanied by an intolerance of anything which appeared to challenge this patriotism. By the time of the war, the Lutheran Mission on the Finke River in central Australia had been in existence for almost forty years. Yet, 'patriots' and mischief-makers put rumours about Alice Springs that Pastor Carl Strehlow of the mission entertained German sympathies. These rumours were investigated and found to be groundless.30 But even so, members of the Cabinet were uneasy about the mission, and considered stopping the £300 annual government subsidy, and replacing Strehlow.31 Administrator Gilruth counselled against this. However, an Adelaide pastoralist, George Bennett who held leases adjacent to the mission, criticized the government for allowing the 'German' mission to hold land, claiming that it was, in reality a cattle station. Following an investigation by H.E. Carey, the Government Secretary, the subsidy was discontinued after June 1917.32

The war was far more traumatic than anyone who volunteered in 1914 had feared, with new and grizzly means found for men to kill one another. Australians everywhere welcomed its end, with the hope that it was 'the war to end all wars'. All were eager to return to the circumstances that prevailed prior to 1914. The AIF was disbanded and in 1921 the citizens' army remodelled to reflect the AIF as it was in 1916.

There was little need for change in Darwin. The Cable Guard was disbanded immediately, and the Naval Reserve group finally disbanded in 1922.

By 1920, however, the world had changed and it was impossible to return to the circumstances that prevailed before the War. Certainly, the war had done nothing to enhance Australia's security: indeed the opposite was true.

30 AAC, A3, 15/2274.
31 AAC, A3, 18/1007.
32 AAC, A3, 22/2967.
Balance of Power

Japan had been the cause of concern to many Australians before the war: this concern was heightened afterwards. Unlike the exhausted nations of Europe, her forces remained intact. Moreover, the war established Japan as a near neighbour of Australia. While Australia was given the mandate over German New Guinea, Japan was given that over the former German colonies north of the Equator, the Marianas, Caroline and Marshall Islands. As J.H. Catts observed in federal parliament, ‘their front door and our back door almost adjoin’.33

So, too, the signing of the Four Power Treaty in Washington on 13 December, 1921, and the Washington Naval Treaty on 6 February, 1922 was a matter of great concern to many Australians, marking as it did the end of British dominance of the seas, and the consolidation of Japan’s sphere of influence in Asia and the Pacific.34 The treaties explicitly limited the number of capital ships of the British Empire, the United States and Japan to the ratio 5:5:3, and bound Britain not to build new fortifications east of Singapore, while the United States agreed to build none west of Hawaii.

Besides changing the balance of world power, the War also introduced new strategic elements into the waging of war, particularly in the use of aircraft. However, while the lessons were evident, not all nations drew the same conclusions. To the military experts in Britain aircraft were essentially defensive weapons, and the policies that they devised for their use were based upon this concept.

While many in Australia were concerned at the consequences of the Washington Treaties, the government used them as justification to run down the naval and military establishments and to postpone the expansion of the infant Air Force. In 1922, the strength of the Army was reduced from 89,824 to 37,560, and the period of training for the Citizen Forces from five to two years: the Navy was reduced from twenty-five ships in 1921 to thirteen in 1922, with the consequent run down in

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33 Commonwealth Hansard, 17 September 1919, p.12421.
Defending the Northern Gateway

personnel. One of the casualties of the Washington Treaty was the scuttling of the battle cruiser Australia off Sydney Heads.

The other major legacy of the War with major implications for defence planners was the evident utility of air power. The early developments in aviation had been closely followed in Australia, and Australians had served with great distinction in the Australian Flying Corps during World War I. Immediately afterwards discussions ensued that led to the establishment of the Australian Air Force on 31 March 1921: it was designated Royal from 13 August, 1921. Yet, although constituted as a separate service from its inception, much of the effort in the inter-war years was spent simply in fighting the senior services to maintain its independence.

Defence Orthodoxy

The defence policy to which Australia subscribed during the whole of the interwar period was essentially a refinement of that which had persisted throughout the colonial period. The principles were embodied in the resolutions of the Imperial Conference of 1923.

The supremacy of the Royal Navy remained Australia's first line of defence. The role of the Army and that of the infant Air Force was to complement that of the Navy: but theirs was to be primarily a role of local defence, though with the capacity to form another expeditionary force should this be necessary. The key to Britain's defence policy in the Far East was to be the development of a major naval base at Singapore to service a Far Eastern fleet: where Darwin was mentioned it was referred to only as a secondary base.

Just as the outcome of the Russo Japanese war in 1905 had set many Australians to question the complacency that characterised much defence philosophy to that time, so too did the aftermath of World War I.

In 1919, even before the Imperial Defence policy had been canonised by the Imperial Conference, Admiral Lord Jellicoe had spoken

37 Hasluck, Government and the People, p.17.
of the growing naval power of Japan and urged the creation of a Far Eastern Fleet based at Singapore, warning that an enemy was most likely to attack British interests when Britain's attention was elsewhere. This doubt was echoed in succeeding years by a number of Australia's Army leaders who became increasingly concerned at the assumptions upon which defence policy was based and the implications that flowed from it. The chief of these assumptions was that the base at Singapore would be operational at the time of any threat; that the Admiralty would, indeed, send a fleet to the Far East, that the Singapore base could be defended until the fleet arrived; and that such a fleet would defeat any enemy ranged against it.38 Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, who was appointed Chief of General Staff in 1923, was not convinced of the soundness of the policy and warned the government of his fears in his Inspector-General Reports.

His fears were not shared by Australia's naval leaders, and the politicians put greater store by the advice from Britain's military experts and the Committee of Imperial Defence. Moreover, in the circumstances that prevailed in the inter-war years, Australia could not have acted independently. Because of its role in World War I Australia had been included in the peace deliberations and the division of the spoils. However, despite national perceptions fostered by this role, it remained a minor nation, and one of the British Dominions. Australia had no independent diplomatic corps or means for the gathering of intelligence. Foreign policy was determined by Britain, and defence policy flowing from it by the Committee of Imperial Defence. Additionally, in Australia, imperial loyalty remained strong, and few Australians, least of all members of the conservative government, would have had it otherwise. Few appreciated that Britain's and Australia's interests were not necessarily identical.

Defence in Australian Politics

Yet while many were concerned with the new balance of power, in the short term others were relieved that the conflict in 1914-18 had been resolved, and steps apparently taken to preclude another. Many of these urged that the Washington treaties and the establishment of the League of Nations provided justification for Australia's disarmament. Anti-militarism was particularly evident in the ranks of the Labor Party

and its supporters, many of whom had fought the conscription campaign and Australia’s involvement in the War because of a conviction that it was primarily an economic, imperialist war.

The conscription issue had split the Labor Party and throughout the interwar period it desperately struggled to rebuild itself. Where it had a policy on defence it advocated one that was fundamentally different from that of the conservatives. The Labor Party remained totally opposed to war, and put great store by the disarmament apparently codified in the Treaty of Washington, and the objectives of the League of Nations. Where their opponents adhered to the Empire policy, based upon the dominance of the Royal Navy, the Labor Party advocated greater self-reliance and stronger home defence with more emphasis given to the development of the Air Force, part of the Labor rationale being that Australia’s defence budget would stretch much further were it to invest in many aircraft rather than a few expensive surface naval vessels.

However, during this period Australia’s defence policy remained essentially that of the conservative parties. The Labor Party under James Scullin held office for little more than two years from late 1929, and that during the depths of the Depression. By this time the resources were not available for it to introduce a radically different defence policy even had it the will to do so.

Defence Programme

Although the Washington Treaty had encouraged the Australian government to run down the defence expenditure, it soon became evident that such treaties must be complemented by armed preparedness. Thus, on 27 June 1924, Prime Minister Bruce announced a five-year defence development programme reflecting the needs of Australia’s defence policy defined at the Imperial Conference the previous year. It provided for each of the services, but, it established an order of precedence that was to persist throughout the inter-war period. The lion’s share of funds went to the navy for the construction of two 10,000 ton cruisers, two submarines and a sea-plane tender.39 By 1929, the Royal Australian Navy had a strength of twenty-eight ships, more than that in 1921. During the same

period the strength of the Army was increased to 45,000 with provision for it to be quickly increased to 200,000.40

During this period the Royal Australian Air Force had not fared well, being forced to muddle along with obsolete World War I equipment. In 1928 Sir John Salmond, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, was invited to report upon the Royal Australian Air Force.41 He proposed a nine-year programme that was designed to create an Air Force capable of reacting to the perceived level of threat to Australia: it included the construction of a flying-boat slipway at Darwin. The Bruce-Page government accepted the plan but lost the succeeding federal election and had no chance to implement it: the onset of depression gave the succeeding Scullin Labor government little chance to pursue the programme.

Defence Measures in the Territory

Because of the low priority given to continental defence generally, few defence initiatives were taken in the Northern Territory during this period.

The acquisition of the land at Bynoe Harbour followed a report by Lieutenant Hardy of the Royal Australian Navy in 1913. It was an initiative endorsed by Viscount Jellicoe in his report to the government in 1919.

... the expense of protecting a base at ... [Port Darwin] against submarine attack would be very great, whereas the anti-submarine defence of Bynoe Harbour is a much simpler matter, owing to the narrow entrance. The latter harbour has other advantages also, particularly in regard to the much lower velocity of the tidal streams.42

Jellicoe, however, was another who insisted that defence works in the Territory must be tied to other developments there. He continued:

42 AAC, CP 601/1/1, Bundle 1/1, Vol. 3, p.165.
Since the probable direction of an attack on Australia is from the north, the naval forces of the Empire that are opposing this attack should naturally be based in northern Australian waters. The undeveloped state of the Northern Territory, and the lack of railway communication to that portion of the Commonwealth, make the establishment of a northern repairing base at present out of the question. As soon as circumstances admit, and railway communication with the rest of Australia is established, a repairing base should be constructed capable of docking and making good defects to the largest ships. Meanwhile, a temporary refuelling and storing base should be established in the Northern territory for use in war; the fuel, as well as provisions and stores required for the fleet, being carried afloat. The position recommended for such a base is Bynoe Harbour, to the westward of Port Darwin.

Bynoe Harbour was also recommended as a seaplane base in a report to the Defence Council in June, 1918 by Wing Commander O.H.K. Maguire, of the Royal Naval Air Service and at the time Air Service Adviser to the Naval Board. Maguire was convinced of the military utility of aviation and of Japanese intentions to acquire the capability. He urged the establishment of a number of seaplane stations around north Australia and in the islands beyond as a means of providing early warning of an approaching enemy. At that time though, Australian authorities were still debating the formation of an air force.

In 1923, however, after Darwin's role in Imperial defence had been outlined at the Imperial Conference, Vice Admiral Sir William Clarkson was appointed by the Minister for Home and Territories 'to proceed to Port Darwin and prepare recommendations in regard to the extension of the wharf and the installation of fuel oil and petrol storage at that Port'. His report of 6 July, 1923 argued that, 'it is most necessary that a reserve stock of fuel oil should be stored somewhere in the north of Australia for Defence purposes and suggests Port Darwin as the site'.

43 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force, pp.2-3.
44 AAC, A1, 33/2455.
The suggestion was taken up by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works the following year, and in November an inter-departmental committee recommended that the Naval and Defence programme required 9 x 8,000 ton oil tanks at Darwin and that one of these together with a 450 ton tank be built immediately. Approval was granted for this work to proceed.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Post-War Development Initiatives}

The period of the early 'twenties, one of boom conditions in the southern parts of Australia, remained one of unrelieved depression in the Territory. Still, successive governments continued to encourage economic development there.

Traditionally, it had been assumed that railway construction promoted development, despite the evident lack of success in the Territory. Thus, in the early twenties, in an endeavour to be seen to be doing something, the government decided to provide more of the same.

The southward extension of the railway beyond Emungalen had long been a major issue for the transcontinental railway lobby. In 1920, it was discussed yet again in parliament, and in November it was agreed that the northern line should be extended to Mataranka.\textsuperscript{46} The Parliamentary Public Works Committee first met on 28 January 1921. When it finally reported to parliament on 5 October 1922, it recommended among other things, that the railway should be extended to Daly Waters, and eventually to Newcastle Waters, then eastwards to Camooweal in Queensland.\textsuperscript{47}

This recommendation was the basis of the Northern Territory Railway Extension Act assented to on 11 August 1923. Work commenced on bridging the Katherine River in 1924, but it was 1926 before construction commenced on the railway. In the meantime, this new ad hoc initiative became part of yet another grandiose scheme which was designed to promote economic development in the Territory.

\textsuperscript{45} AAC, A1, 33/2455.
\textsuperscript{46} Commonwealth Hansard, 25 November 1920, p.7054.
\textsuperscript{47} C.P.P., 76-1922.
Yet, while government ministers and lay people generally were concerned to foster development matters that might facilitate the defence of the Territory, it seems that their concerns were not immediately shared by those who had control of the nation's defences. Mention has been made of the government's initiative in 1914 of appointing a Royal Commission to make recommendations about the Territory's ports and railways.

The majority of commissioners recommended the completion of the Transcontinental Railway with a connection to the Queensland border as a matter of some urgency.

The minority report of A. Combes was less sanguine. He advanced the arguments of Australia's top military personnel to support his case.

One of the arguments used by advocates of connecting Darwin with the southern railway system is that it is an urgent necessity from a defence point of view, but although General Gordon, Chief of the General Staff, and Colonel Dangar, Chief of Ordnance of the Australian Army, were called before the Commission, both declined to express any opinion on the necessity or otherwise for railways in the Territory. Admiral Creswell also gave evidence before the Commission. He pointed out the 'excellent strategic position' occupied by Darwin for a naval base, but beyond stating 'the greater the population the better the protection for a naval base,' he declined to express any opinion on the railway question.48

It seems that this view persisted among Australia's military chiefs.

In 1922 Major-General Sir Cyril B.B. White, Chief of General Staff, appeared before the Public Works Standing Committee which was then considering the extension of the Port Augusta/Oodnadatta Railway to Stuart - officially renamed Alice Springs in 1933. 'From a purely defence point of view,' he remarked, 'in the immediate future, and in the future as

48 C.P.P., 31-1914, p.53.
far as can be predicted for some time to come, a railway to the north is not an essential military provision. 49

White went on to argue what was then official military thinking, that Australia was essentially secure from any foreseeable foreign invasion because of Britain's naval supremacy, and that any attack that was able to run the British naval gauntlet could be easily repelled. And to White, 'The North is not vital'. Because of the concentration of population in Australia's south-east, here must be Australia's defence priority. He dismissed the defence utility of the railway by suggesting that it would be useful only if the enemy landed at the other end.

The politicians were more sanguine and persisted with initiatives designed to prosper the Territory. The Northern Australia Act was passed in 1926, proclaimed on 1 February 1927. The Commission appointed under the terms of the Act was to concern itself solely with development works in North Australia - north of the twentieth degree of latitude; and within this region it had wide powers - on paper at least. 50

The Commission achieved little, despite the earnestness of its members. Among other things, the first report identified a need for fourteen additional bores on existing stock routes. By 1930, the Commission had been able to provide only seven - although it had managed to accumulate a staff of thirty-one. 51 Federal funds were simply not forthcoming for capital works. Indeed the Chairman, on his return to Darwin in April, 'informed the astonished [advisory] Council that the Minister would take little or no notice of any recommendations that the Commission made'. 52 The Northern Australia Act served only to bloat the ineffectual administrative structure and to increase its cost inordinately.

Railway Construction

However, in July 1929, white settlement in Central Australia received a tremendous fillip with the completion of railway extensions from Oodnadatta to Stuart. Prior to this time, the nearest railhead was

49 C.P.P., 76-1922, p.268.
50 C.P.P., 222-1926/27, p.4.
52 Bulletin, 30 May 1928.
654 kilometres south, at Oodnadatta in South Australia. Stock for southern markets had to be overlanded there, and supplies for Central Australian residents were dependent upon the teams of camel drivers who worked from there. The railroad had an immediate effect upon these arrangements. After the opening of the line on 5 August, until 24 October 1929, 6,718 fat cattle were railed from Central Australia to markets in Adelaide.53 The cost of supplies to the Centre was greatly reduced; that of motor spirit by fifty per cent.54 This in turn renewed interest in mineral exploration in Central Australia. At the same time, it encouraged tourism to the Centre during the southern winters.

The completion of this railway had nothing to do with initiatives responsible for, or flowing from, the Northern Australia Act of 1926. Rather, it must be seen as but one more development in the longstanding saga associated with the idea of a north-south transcontinental railway. The recommendation to construct the railway from Oodnadatta to Stuart was made by the Parliamentary Works Committee in 1922 - and ratified by parliament soon after; but it was 18 September 1925 before an agreement permitting construction work was drawn up between the Commonwealth and South Australian governments. Then, it was not until after the Bruce-Page government was returned at the election in November, that the agreement was submitted to the federal parliament.55

There were delays in commencing the work. This went counter to the terms of the 1925 agreement, but was of little consequence. The first sod was turned with due ceremony at Oodnadatta on 21 January 1927,56 and work began. By May 1929, there were 860 men at work on the construction of the line: 130 employees of the Commonwealth Railways and 730 employed by the Victorian Construction Pty. Ltd.57 During the period of general depression, this provided welcome employment. The line was completed to Stuart by July 1929, and opened for traffic early in August - only a little more than a month after the agreed date.

53 C.P.P., 82-1929/30/31, p.22.
54 C.P.P., 12-1929, p.4.
55 Adelaide Observer, 23 January 1926, p.36b.
57 AAC, A431, 47/147.
At this time too, railway works under the terms of the Northern Territory Railway Extension Act of 1923, were under way in North Australia. Work commenced on the railway construction in 1926. It was undertaken directly by the Commonwealth using day labour and piecework. At one time, there were upwards of 500 men engaged. The line to Mataranka was opened for traffic on 1 July 1928, and by 4 September 1929, trains ran as far as Birdum. Here work halted. The continued world-wide depression had induced the government to abandon plans to complete the line to Daly Waters, only seventy kilometres to the south, although much of the earthworks had been completed.

In contrast to the Central Australian railway, there were few immediate benefits to northern residents flowing from the railway construction. The settlement which had been Emungalan, was transferred to the south bank of the river, and became the nucleus of the new town of Katherine. A small railway settlement was established at Birdum. But it induced few - if any - new settlers to take up land close to the line.

The North Australia Commission was concerned only with the economic development of the Territory but in its first report it did recognise that some initiatives also had strategic implications. When considering the question of a railway line from Daly Waters to the Queensland border it noted:

> Whilst the Commission cannot express any definite opinion as to the value of such a line, i.e., from Darwin to Bourke, for defence purposes, it is considered most probable that in this direction it would be of considerable strategic importance...

Because it considered the standard gauge to be the most appropriate it also recommended that the existing North Australia Railway be converted to standard gauge.

The North Australia Commission was a significant drain on federal funds at a time of severe financial stress. It was a major factor in the increased cost of Northern Territory administration during this time. As such, there was no surprise when, in 1931, the Northern Australia Act

58 Northern Territory Times and Government Gazette, 22 February 1927.
59 Ibid., 25 April 1930.
60 AAC, A1/1, 28/4744.
(1926) was repealed. Indeed, except for the Bruce-Page government losing face by repealing the act soon after its proclamation, the surprise is that the experiment persisted for so long, particularly since the Bruce-Page government was defeated at the general election on 12 October 1929.

As far as both Australia’s defence policy and the Northern Territory were concerned, the first decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a policy of 'steady as she goes'. The new commonwealth government presided over the formation of a national army and an independent navy both of which acquitted themselves with distinction during World War I. However, despite major changes in the balance of world power during this period, the policy which determined the deployment and development of these services, and that of the Air Force, remained similar to that persisting in the nineteenth century.

The new government also initiated numbers of projects to promote white settlement and development in the Territory, in part to make it more defencible. Little of substance was achieved.

The onset of depression in the later 1920s aborted further initiatives for the defence forces and the development of the Northern Territory.
CHAPTER 5

POST DEPRESSION, 1929-37

Just as the Great War left an indelible impression on Australians, so too did the Depression. It was the more catastrophic because it followed a period of economic boom, and because Australia relied so heavily on the export of primary products. For a time nearly 30% of Australia's breadwinners were unemployed. All governments changed. Australia's defence spending was but one of the many areas in which economies were made.

The Depression

When it assumed power on 12 October, 1929, the Scullin Labor government faced a daunting task. While the international political situation continued to deteriorate, the consequences of the collapse of the world economy and its effects on that of Australia demanded attention.

Because it was a plank in his campaign platform, Scullin abolished Australia's system of military service. But as an economy measure he returned Australia's two submarines to Great Britain and paid off five other vessels into the naval reserve.

Labor's defence policy favoured self reliance, and as a corollary of this, the strengthening of the Royal Australian Air Force before the Navy. However, during its short time in power it had neither the will nor the means to implement changes in Australia's defence establishment, except those designed to promote economies. The defence vote decreased from £7,890,839 under the Bruce-Page government in 1926/27 to £6,536,482 in 1928/29, and £3,184,836 under the Scullin government in 1931/32. In two years the gains made under the modest re-armament programme of the Bruce-Page government were surrendered.

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Events beyond Australia

While successive Australian governments grappled with the effects of the depression, events in Europe became increasingly ominous. In January, 1933 Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany and began a programme of re-armament, and later in the same year, Germany resigned from the League of Nations. Mussolini pursued a similar policy in Italy, and embarked on an expansionist programme when in 1935 his army invaded Ethiopia.

The League of Nations was powerless to oppose these developments, and an increasing number of members initiated re-armament programmes.

Closer to home developments in the Pacific region became matters of increasing concern. Japanese forces invaded Manchuria in 1931. Two years later, Japan resigned from the League of Nations, denounced the Washington Treaty of 1922, and refused to renew the London Naval Treaty of 1930. At this time when Australia was spending 4.4% of its revenue on defence, Japan was spending 37.6%. Japanese expansion continued in 1937 when troops invaded China.

The British naval base at Singapore, the keystone of Britain's naval strategy in the East, had not been completed. Indeed, as a 'gesture for peace', Ramsay MacDonald's Labor Government in 1924 had discontinued work there: however, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria persuaded the government to accelerate work on the base once again.

Defence Policy

Despite the fundamental changes in the balance of power in Europe and the Pacific, the Empire's Eastern defence policy, and therefore that of Australia, remained the same as that determined at the Imperial Conference in 1923.

However, changes in the balance of power since that time had led an increasing number of people to question the long established policy. Many members of the Army, in particular, remained critical of the orthodox policy and the large share of the defence vote given to the

They continued to advert to Japan as Australia's most likely security threat, and to warn that Japanese aggression in the Pacific was most likely when Britain was engaged in a European war, and when there was no guarantee that she would be able to protect bases in the Far East. Such critics doubted the capability of the Singapore base to withstand a determined Japanese attack in these circumstances and advocated greater spending on the defence of Australia.

The Australian Labor Party, once again in opposition in 1931, continued to argue for a greater measure of independence from Britain, and amplified the doubts of those Army men who challenged the defence orthodoxy. In 1935 John Curtin became leader of the parliamentary Labor Party and sought to refine Labor's policy, but the Party was not in a position to effect any policy changes.

However, the continued deterioration in relations in Europe meant that from 1936 the reality of war had to be a feature of any defence policy; indeed Britain had embarked on a re-armament programme in 1935. As a measure of their increased importance, foreign affairs and defence were amongst the main issues discussed at the Imperial Conference in 1937. Moreover, defence became one of the major issues during the federal election campaign in Australia in 1937.

Japanese in the Northern Territory.

However, while the government became increasingly concerned about the possibility of war with Japan, it maintained a curious ambivalence towards the Japanese who frequented Australia's northern waters.

Since the latter years of the nineteenth century the Japanese had formed the backbone of the pearling industry that worked the shell beds of northern Australia. The beds off Broome and Thursday Island attracted most of the pearlers, but many worked out of Darwin, and several families

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5 Long, Six Years War, p.3.
6 Hasluck, Government and the People, 1939-1941, p.60.
7 Ibid., pp.55-73.
settled there permanently. They caused little concern in the cosmopolitan town.

More concern was shown towards the increasing numbers of pearling fleets based in Japan that appeared off the north coast in the 'thirties. The Territory's member in federal parliament raised the alarm in late 1933 expressing concern at the scope for intelligence gathering. The government did not share his alarm. Indeed, it seemed that the greater fear was that the increased number of pearlers would denude the fishing grounds. Finally in 1935 the government proposed that a patrol boat be provided to police the pearl fishing, on the understanding that it would also be required to work in association with the air service working out of Darwin, to stand-by in the event of emergencies whenever aeroplanes were scheduled to cross the Timor Sea.

The Larrakia, when it went into service in 1936, proved unsuitable for the conditions in the north, and wholly inadequate to curtail Japanese activities in the pearling grounds.

However, while Territorians were concerned about Japanese effects on the oyster beds, they positively welcomed the visits of Japanese naval vessels. In both 1936 and 1937 Darwin played hosts to Japanese training ships. On each occasion the Japanese officers and crews were entertained amicably in Darwin, at government expense. Local people showed none of the paranoia that gripped defence analysts in the south at the time.

The Defence Budget

Irrespective of growing fears of Japanese intentions, the continuing effects of the depression meant that the conservative government of J. Lyons that toppled the Scullin government in December, 1931, could do nothing immediately to lift defence spending, even had it wished to do so. However, improving circumstances enabled the Senator George Pearce, the Minister of Defence, on 25 September,
1933 at the Millions Club in Sydney, to announce the commencement of a rehabilitation programme

From £4,157,494 in 1933/34 the defence budget almost doubled to £8,065,142 in 1936/37 and doubled again to £16,800,000 in financial year 1938/9.12

Renewed Development Initiatives in the Territory

In 1931, the Scullin Labor government abolished the North Australia Commission as an economy measure. Thereafter development initiatives by the federal government in the Northern Territory languished even though the general Australian economy slowly recovered.

Yet, although economic activity in the Territory remained at a low ebb during the 'thirties and the much vaunted Central Australian Gold Expedition in search of Lasseter's fabulous reef had proved a duffer, the foundation was laid for the resurgence of mining activity that was to be the Territory's major income-earning industry for the remainder of the interwar period.

It is not surprising that there should have been this interest in mining at a time 'when all Australia was looking to a new Kalgoorlie to put the country on its feet again'. This had fired Harold Bell Lasseter and those who shared his dream. In the 'thirties, as in the 'nineties of the previous century, depression had encouraged men to prospect for precious metals, and in Central Australia, the government encouraged this by staking prospectors for periods of up to twelve weeks.

While the Granites proved to be a duffer, discoveries at Tennant Creek proved to be a bonanza. Small quantities of gold were discovered in the vicinity of the Tennant Creek telegraph station in the first years of the century, but no major finds were made. However, the depression of the 'thirties induced hopeful prospectors to pick over the countryside once again. Then, early in 1933 payable gold was found by the Peter Pan Gold Mining Company, and applications were made for three leases.

The rush to the Tennant Creek field began late in August 1933. It was underpinned by other substantial discoveries. In January, rich deposits were made sixteen kilometres from the Pinnacles mine.

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12 Hasluck, Government and the People, 1939-1941, p.41.
reportedly returning 2,860 grams of gold from eleven tonnes of ore. By the middle of the year there were nearly 300 men working on a field that then extended over sixty-five kilometres.

In September 1934 an area less than a kilometre south of the hotel was reserved as the site for government buildings, and during the following May the township was surveyed. In addition to building construction, the government provided a bore to ease problems associated with a scarcity of water and began road works in mid-1936. By late 1937 the government had expended nearly £55,000 in helping to establish the town and the field.

The field prospered. In the year 1936-37 gold to the value of £85,565 was won. The government established two batteries there at a cost of £15,000, and in April 1930 work began on the erection of a third. To this time there was no indication that production had peaked, a fact that encouraged companies to abandon inefficient mining methods and to install larger and more permanent equipment.

On 23 March 1937, after the nation's economy had begun to improve, the Minister for the Interior, Thomas Paterson, appointed yet another commission to enquire into 'Land and Land Industries in the Northern Territory'. The comprehensive report by W.L. Payne, Chairman of the Queensland Land Administration Board, and J.W. Fletcher, a Queensland pastoralist, was completed on 10 October 1937.13

The threat of war in the later 'thirties excused governments from making any attempt to implement suggestions flowing from the Payne-Fletcher enquiry. After outlining the government's policy for the Territory in December 1938, John McEwen, who succeeded Paterson, warned his parliamentary colleagues that 'the extremely heavy commitments of the Government for defence render it necessary that the expenditure to implement the New Northern Territory policy will, like all other items of expenditure, be kept under review in the light of the current budgetary position'.14 The delays in coaxing the 'New Policy' from McEwen suggest that the government was loath to implement the recommendations of the enquiry, regardless of military demands.

13 Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper, 4-1937.
14 Commonwealth Hansard, 8 December 1938, pp.2985-6.
Aviation

Regardless of government initiatives, technological developments also served to focus attention on the Territory. As the nation's northern gateway, it became evident that this remote part of Australia was the nearest to the nations of Asia.

Prior to the late thirties, the Northern Territory did not figure widely in debate on Australia's defence. Some, like former Administrator F.C. Urquhart, suggested that a sparsely-populated Territory was a security risk.\(^{15}\)

However, during the 'thirties, governments had neither the financial nor political resolve to divert substantial funds to the north for defence purposes. As late as 1937, there were still experts ready to argue that the sparsely-populated north was a most effective barrier against invasion,\(^{16}\) and that perhaps some parts of remote Australia might have to be relinquished in the face of a determined attack and retaken later.\(^{17}\) However, at the same time there were major technological developments being made which served to reduce the isolation of the Territory.

If in the minds of many strategists the question of the transcontinental railway was one closely identified with the defence of Australia, so too was the development of aviation.

The utility of air-power had been one of the major lessons of World war I. Though as with so many other instances some powers learnt more than others. For most strategists, particularly those of Britain from whom those of Australia took their lead, aircraft remained essentially a defensive weapon.

Australia contributed little to the development of aircraft technology or tactics. However, much was done there to demonstrate its utility in the conquest of distance and isolation.

\(^{15}\) F.C. Urquhart, 'The Northern Territory', in *Australian Quarterly*, No. 4, December 1929, pp.31-2.


\(^{17}\) Douglas Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, (Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962), p.44.
The rapid development of aviation had particular importance for northern Australia, and was instrumental in breaking down that isolation that had exacerbated problems associated with all attempts to develop the region. The realisation of this dawned upon the people of Darwin when on December, 1919, the Vickers-Vimy, flown by the ex-Australian Flying Corps brothers, Ross and Keith Smith, the first of the planes competing in the England to Australia air race landed at Fannie Bay. The flight had taken twenty-eight days. In succeeding years numbers of others followed: in 1928 Bert Hinkler made the flight in sixteen days.

As well as helping to break down Australia's isolation from the rest of the world, developments in aviation also served to break down isolation in Australia. This was admirably demonstrated in April and May, 1924 when two RAAF officers flew around Australia in thirty-four days. Aviation also served to open up the interior. As late as the mid-'twenties, despite a half-century of European settlement in the Centre, there were still parts of it which were virtually unknown. Thus, the exploration of this region became the special concern of C.T. Madigan, the companion of Douglas Mawson on the latter's Antarctic explorations in 1911-14, and by this time a lecturer in geology at the University of Adelaide. It was at Madigan's insistence that aircraft was first used in geological work in Australia, and the first attempt was made at aerial strip photography. This pioneering aerial survey was undertaken with the support of the South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, and the loan of two aircraft from the Royal Australian Air Force. In all, nine flights were made in Central Australia, during which more than 5,000 kilometres were flown during August and September 1929.18

Developments in aviation affected many areas of Territory life, and all helped to break down the isolation of centres in the Territory. This was epitomized by the work of Dr Clyde Fenton, who in 1934 commenced the Northern Territory Aerial Medical Service. Unlike the Flying Doctor Service inaugurated by John Flynn, Fenton flew his own plane. From Katherine and Darwin he travelled to all remote centres of the Top End.19

18 C.T. Madigan, 'An Aerial Reconnaissance into the South-Eastern Region of Central Australia', in Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch, Proceedings, 30, 1930. See also Madigan notebooks and diaries, Mortlock Library, PRG 43.
19 Clyde Fenton, Flying Doctor, (Georgian House, Melbourne, 1947).
Others took up the initiative of Madigan. In 1934, largely at the urging of the industrialist Sir Herbert Gepp, steps were taken to mount an aerial, geological and geophysical survey of northern Australia. This was an historic venture in that it involved the cooperation of three governments, those of Queensland, Western Australia and the Commonwealth, in pooling their resources to investigate the mineral possibilities of the remote interior. The aerial photography was undertaken by the Royal Australian Air Force.

This aerial survey was complemented on the ground by several teams of geologists. The survey commenced in 1935, and though Western Australia pulled out in 1938, work continued in Queensland and the Northern Territory until 1941. No spectacular mineral discoveries were made, but the survey succeeded in obtaining a great deal of geological information which was of value to the mining industry generally, and although it was primarily a geological study, it provided a great deal of information which was later to be of value for defence purposes.

By the 'thirties aviation was no longer the preserve of barnstorming adventurers and the Royal Australian Air Force. During the 'twenties and 'thirties numbers of civil airlines had been established, one of the most significant being the Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Services Limited began operation in 1920. In December, 1934, in association with the British Imperial Airways, Qantas commenced regular passenger flights between Australia and England via Darwin.

The development of international air links, in particular had a major effect upon attitudes of ordinary Australians to Darwin and Northern Australia. Where before it had been Australia's back door, now it became the first port of entry for many international visitors. But, while aviation served to break down the isolation of Darwin from other population centres of Australia, it also served to make it more accessible to the major centres of Asia.

Irrespective of its policy towards the Royal Australian Air Force, the conservative governments took a close interest in the development of aviation in Australia. It was a fundamental plank of the government's

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21 Hudson Fysh, Qantas Rising, (Rigby, Adelaide, 1965).
Defending the Northern Gateway
defence policy to subsidise civil aviation in order to develop networks and facilities that might be used in time of war.

In mid-1934 George Pearce, long an advocate of close links between civil and military aviation, took the opportunity of the opening of the new air-mail service to London to elaborate on its 'important bearing on the air defence of Australia'. He insisted that the new service would make Darwin a very important airport for Australia. In particular he adverted to the facilities then being provided at the aerodrome 'which will be an important factor in the air defence of Australia, if any threat should come from the north'.

In this respect the year 1938 was a particularly significant one for aviation in the Northern Territory. By year's end, there were twenty scheduled weekly services through Darwin. The air route between Sydney and London through Darwin was upgraded during the year when flying boats were introduced on the route. In July, the Dutch Airline, KNILM, began operations between Batavia and Sydney. And in September, Guinea Airways, which was formed in 1927 to service the goldfields of Guinea Gold in New Guinea, and inaugurated a regular service between Darwin and Adelaide through the major inland centres of Katherine, Daly Waters, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. This route had been pioneered by Australian Transcontinental Airways Limited in August 1935, but at the time it met with little success, and was discontinued two months later.

Just as Darwin took on a new significance with aviation developments, so too in a lesser degree, did Alice Springs. In 1939, it became the home port of Connellan Airways, which on 4 July, inaugurated a regular service between Alice Springs and Wyndham with the aid of a government subsidy of one half penny per mile. E.J. Connellan had long sought such an opportunity, and in this enterprise,

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22 Commonwealth Hansard, 1 August 1934, p.981.
23 Administrator's Report, 1938, p.16.
24 Northern Standard, 8 July 1938.
26 Northern Standard, 11 October 1935.
27 AAD, F1, 39/697.
28 AAC, A431, 49/113.
he was encouraged personally by Minister McEwen, whilst the latter was on his visit to the Territory in 1938.

The effects of the new transport technology were reflected in the township of Alice Springs. Where once it was a primitive bush town, by the late thirties it was, according to Abbott, 'a modern clean and thriving town with many facilities [including electricity] which were almost unheard of a few years ago'. By mid-1938, it boasted a population of 864, of whom 551 were Europeans: the others comprised twenty-two Asians, and 279 half-castes with twelve 'others'. After the growth of Tennant Creek, it became an important distribution centre, a position which was reinforced with the mining of wolfram at Hatches Creek. And, in the late thirties, it gained in popularity as a winter resort for tourists from the south, and tours were organized throughout central Australia.

No longer was Alice Springs the isolated centre it had been only a decade before.

**RAAF**

The question of a permanent RAAF presence in the Top End had been raised in 1932 by Administrator Weddell who hoped that the Air Force might be used to help police foreign pearlers and trepangers operating in Northern territory waters. He had already requested a fast patrol boat from his Minister, without success.

On 31 March, 1932, following a visit of several RAAF officers to Darwin, Weddell wrote to Air Commodore R. Williams asking if a plane - even a Moth - might be stationed in Darwin. Williams as sympathetic, but not hopeful. Finally, on 18 September, 1934 the Secretary of the Air Board informed the Secretary of the Department of the Interior 'that it is not likely that a unit of the RAAF will be stationed in the near future'.

At this time the Royal Australian Air Force had neither the personnel nor equipment to sustain a base in Darwin; the inter-service politics necessitated that the RAAF presence should be concentrated in south-eastern Australia. However, in 1934, the government finally

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30 Chronicle, 8 February 1934, p.51.
31 AAC, A705/1, 13/5/151.
embarked on a development programme for the Air Force. At the suggestion of Essington Lewis, the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation was formed on 17 October, 1936 and began making an American designed fighter.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the reluctance to station the Air Force in Darwin, a number of other defence works were established there during the 'thirties.

**Defence Works**

By mid-1932 four of the nine fuel tanks planned for Darwin were completed and the material was on site for two more. On 11 May, 1932 Cabinet approved the construction of these two extra tanks together with the installation of four 6-inch guns and defence lights.\textsuperscript{33} Tenders were let for three more tanks at the end of 1934.

In September, 1932 a small detachment of five officers and 42 other ranks, Royal Australian Artillery and Royal Australian Engineers, arrived in Darwin to supervise the installation of the guns and to construct barracks for the permanent garrison that was to protect the oil installations.

Economy was the order of the day. The six inch guns were those saved from a scrapped cruiser. Two were installed on East Point and two on Emery Point. By 1936, Darwin's defences were completed by an anti-aircraft battery.

**The Darwin Garrison**

The building of the fueling facilities called for a force to protect them. Accordingly, in September, 1932, Cabinet approval was given for a garrison to be established permanently at Darwin. On 20 September, a small force of three officers and twenty-nine other ranks arrived in Darwin to replace the Engineers, and, with the artillerymen, form the Darwin Garrison, the 9th Heavy Battery: by 1936 the garrison comprised four officers and 84 other ranks. Originally the garrison was administered by the District Base Commandant of the 1st Military District in Brisbane,

\textsuperscript{32} Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, pp.40-3.

\textsuperscript{33} AAC, A571/1, 32/2612.
but on 1 October, 1934, control was transferred to Army Headquarters in Melbourne.34

Home of the early detachment and the garrison was the derelict Vesty’s meatworks. Here they remained until new barracks were built on land acquired for the purpose on Larrakeyah Peninsula in 1933.

The first portion was gazetted on 31 August, 1933, though additional allotments were acquired over succeeding years, until on 2 November, 1939, all of the peninsula was proclaimed a Defence Reserve.35

Construction of the barracks for the garrison commenced there in April, 1934. It was expected that the buildings used by the now disbanded garrison on Thursday Island should be dismantled and reused in Darwin. In the event their poor condition prevented this from being made.

Once again, during the 'thirties development in the Territory closely reflected that of the armed forces and for essentially the same reasons. The need for economy during the period of the depression prompted the scuttling of many development initiatives in the Territory and the consolidation of the armed forces. However, the increasingly unstable strategic situation in both Europe and Asia drew increasing attention to the need to invest in both the Northern Territory and the nation's defence forces. In the latter 'thirties the two became closely identified.

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34 AAC, A571, 32/2612.
35 AAC, A431/1, 49/864.
CHAPTER 6
BUILD-UP TO WAR, 1937-39

While Australia was naturally concerned at the expansionist policies of Japan to its north, it also had a vital interest in developments in Europe because of the close identification of Australia's foreign policy with that of Britain. Closer to home, Australia's first line of defence remained the Royal Navy. It was becoming increasingly probable that Britain would be implicated in another European war. However, except for the protestations, there was no firm guarantee that units of the Royal Navy would be despatched to the Far East if Britain was fighting for its life in Europe: even in the event of capital ships being despatched there was certainly no guarantee that they would command the sealanes.

Imperial Conference - 1937

Foreign policy and imperial defence were the chief topics discussed at the Imperial Conference in 1937, the first for seven years. It was evident to Australia's delegates, however, that the foreign policy was predominantly concerned with British interests in Europe. In the event the conference confirmed the defence policy adopted fourteen years earlier.

However, with the intelligence gained from the conference Australia continued, indeed, intensified its preparations for war. In November, 1938, a Manpower Committee was established under Major-General Thomas Blamey to prepare plans for the allocation of personnel between the armed forces and essential services in time of emergency, and steps were taken to compile the War Book detailing measures to be taken in case of war.

In 1938, the government once again sought advice from Britain, in the person of Marshal of the Air Force, Sir Richard Edward Ellington. In 1937 the RAAF's strike force comprised only two squadrons, but plans were implemented to increase this to twelve in 1939. However, like the other service arms, the Air Force was now handicapped by problems of supply of modern equipment.

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Because of the unsettled political situation, particularly in Europe, preparation for war became more intense around Australia during 1938. Particularly after the Munich crisis, a number of defence measures were taken, including a recruiting campaign for the militia. Plans were set in train, and increased orders for war equipment placed with manufacturers. However, because other nations were also re-arming there were considerable delays in receiving the necessary equipment.

Darwin in 1938

Darwin underwent changes as a result of its decreased isolation and the increasing recognition of its strategic importance. In 1938, the *Northern Standard* spoke of the town 'entering upon a new era'. It pointed to the replacement of 'the original ragged scattered buildings' with 'modern tropical architecture', the provision of additional electricity generating plant, plans for a new water supply and additions to the hospital and Aborigines' compound.

Darwin had long been deficient in suitable accommodation for visitors and itinerant workers. In the short term, the situation was aggravated by the cyclone which devastated Darwin during the night of 10-11 March 1937. Worker accommodation was stretched to the limit with the influx of labourers eager for employment on defence works after 1937. The new works were calculated to change Darwin completely. Thus it was, that the years after 1937 saw a considerable increase in building activity in Darwin.

Defence Works

The bulk of the construction work undertaken in Darwin during the late thirties was undertaken for defense purposes. Besides barracks for a new force to be headquartered in Darwin, there were also plans for a naval patrol base and the deployment of a detachment of the Air Force at the airport.

Just as importantly, in 1938 provision was made for a dam to be put across the Manton River to provide an enhanced water supply for Darwin. The system of wells and tanks that had sufficed for the tiny

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population to this time clearly would not be adequate for the expected influx of military personnel.

**Darwin Mobile Force**

The threat of war during the latter years of the decade prompted the government to increase the military presence in Darwin. A report of the Inspector-General of the British Army, Lieutenant-General E.K. Squires suggested that Australia lacked a truly mobile force which would be useful in the remote areas.3 The establishment of such a force was recommended by the Chief of Staff Sub-Committee during the Imperial Conference in 1937. After July 1938, the government announced plans to station 750 service personnel in Darwin.4 And on 6 October, 1938 the Minister approved the raising of such a force, its chief role being to protect Darwin from sporadic raids.5 It had the distinction of being the first field force unit raised in the Australian Permanent Military Forces. Although it was essentially an infantry unit it was classified as artillery, because the Defence Act prohibited the raising of permanent infantry forces during peace-time.

Recruitment took place in November, 1938, with basic training being undertaken at Liverpool near Sydney. The Darwin Mobile Force (DMF) paraded through Sydney on 9 March before the advance party embarked for Darwin. The first of the 250-strong DMF arrived in Darwin later that same month.6 When the remainder of the Force arrived, practically the whole of the town turned out to see 'the biggest military parade ever held in the Northern Territory'.7

Barrack accommodation was provided in the one-time Vesteys meatworks.

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4 *Northern Standard*, 29 July 1938.
5 AAC, A816/1, 31/301/1.
6 *Northern Standard*, 21 March 1939, p.12.
RAAF

The first of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) personnel to be stationed in Darwin also began their tour of duty at Vesteys.

Those formulating Australia's defence policy after 1937 envisaged that Darwin would become an important secondary Naval base to that at Singapore. The RAAF was given the task of defending Darwin because of its strategic role in the naval defence policy.

In mid 1936 Australian defence analysts were concerned at the 'rapid development of the Japanese Fleet Air Arm' and requested a review of the defence policy by the Committee of Imperial Defence. They were reassured 'that the presence of aircraft in Australian waters is not to be expected. Defence against organised air attack from carrier borne aircraft is therefore, not considered necessary.'

At that time the accepted wisdom was that the most likely scale of attack on Darwin would be by raid from an enemy cruiser and defences were planned accordingly. In March, 1937, an inter-service sub-committee therefore considered that the appropriate level of air defence would be one general purpose squadron and one general reconnaissance squadron. Plans were immediately drawn up to establish an Air Force presence in Darwin.

In April, 1937, Wing Commander A. Hepburn, Services Director of Works, who visited Darwin to select sites for the services and for the Air Force, recommended a site for a new military airport six kilometres from the town near the railway line: the civil airport was not considered adequate. After RAAF authorities had approved the choice, the site was acquired, and early in 1938 work began on clearing it. While work proceeded on the preparation of the site for the new airfield, decisions were made to form the squadrons that were to defend Darwin. In fact, No 12 General Purpose Squadron, RAAF, was formed at Laverton in Victoria on 6 February, 1939, with original equipment comprising Avro Ansons and Hawker Demons.

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8 AAC, A1608/1, B15/1/9.
Defending the Northern Gateway

The continuing deterioration of situation in Europe persuaded the Air Force on 8 May, 1939 to send No 12 Squadron to Darwin as soon as possible after 1 July even though it must operate for a time from the civil aerodrome. An advance construction party of two officers and 30 other ranks left Melbourne on the 'Marella' on 1 July in order to prepare for the remainder of the Squadron. Work on the construction of suitable accommodation for RAAF personnel began on the new site at the end of June, 1939.

The whole of the squadron was in Darwin by late August. Soon afterwards, on 5 September, 1939, the first of the Wirraways built by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation arrived to replace the obsolete Ansons and Demons. Unfortunately one of these new aircraft stalled and crashed while attempting to land: Flying Officer A.V. Dolphin and his observer, Corporal H.W. Johnson were killed.

Royal Australian Navy

Although in the event of war Darwin's chief importance was to be that of a naval base, the Navy had only a small presence in the town. No vessels were stationed there during the 'thirties, though during the decade an increasing number staged through Darwin in order to show the flag. In order to co-ordinate arrangements for the increasing number of visits, the Naval Reserve Depot was reopened in 1934 in the Eastern Extension Company's buildings and, until 1936, came under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Jarrett.

The most significant of the early naval defensive works was the construction in 1937 of its own communications station, HMAS Coonawarra with a range upwards of 13,000 kilometres. With the onset of war Coonawarra was a vital part of Australia's intelligence gathering network. Coonawarra was built at the behest of the Imperial Communications Committee as a means of upgrading communications between Empire Ships in the South-West Pacific. As early as 1923 the Committee recommended to the Imperial Defence Committee that transmitters be established at Darwin and near the centre of government. The recommendation was reiterated in 1936.

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10 Diary of 7MD, AWM 52 1/7/46.
11 A1/1, 37/6698.
The proposed shortwave set at Port Darwin, is intended to communicate with the Naval Stations at Singapore and Hong Kong, with the proposed Canberra Station, and with warships in the China Sea, and off the North Coast of Australia . . . Since the complementary Communications in the Far East, viz the provision of a well-equipped Naval W/T Station at Singapore will be completed in 1937, we strongly recommend that the erection of the Australian Station should be proceeded now with all despatch.13

HMAS Harman near Canberra was commissioned on 20 April 1939; Coonawarra began operations on 18 September.

It is apparent, however, that its intelligence gathering role was envisaged from the beginning. Direction finding equipment was installed during November and December 1939, it was calibrated in January 1940 and the station began signal monitoring and intelligence gathering on 26 February 1940.14 By October 1940 Coonawarra had four part-time cryptographic intelligence specialists in addition to the wireless operators.

The other arms of the services, based on the outskirts of the town, were accommodated without much trouble. However, the Navy caused considerable consternation when it sought to acquire upwards of 50 hectares of prime town lots overlooking the port.15 For several years a Darwin Development Committee had been concerned with planning the future development of the town. Special consideration was given to defence requirements, and all the land on the harbour side of Bennett Street was tentatively earmarked for Naval purposes, about 69 blocks.16 However, the Navy had been reluctant to cooperate. In the event only 16 blocks were resumed.17

13 Quoted in 'Naval Wireless Telegraphy Station Coonawarra' in Top End Navy, p.11.
14 See copy of Department of Defence Minute dated 9 August 1939 and Navy Office Message dated 17 February 1940 in possession of Dr. D. Ball, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.
15 AAC, A877/1, CL5269.
16 A659/1, 43/1/7077.
17 A877/1, CL5269.
Soon afterwards buildings were erected in the neighbourhood of Fort Hill for Boom Defences.

The most significant of the early naval defensive works was the construction in 1937 of its own wireless station HMAS Coonawarra with a range upwards of 13,000 kilometres. While primarily built to facilitate communication with Australia's naval ships in northern waters, once a network of agents had been established to the north of Australia it proved to be an important feature of Australia's intelligence gathering capabilities.

The situation in Australia in 1939

Circumstances in the region immediately north of Australia had changed dramatically during the 'thirties. Australia's defence policy failed to do so despite the increasing concern of the nation's Army commanders. Though they had the means, the politicians continued to hope for peace and were reluctant to invest in measures that might prove unnecessary. Moreover, as Prime Minister Lyons insisted on 27 April, 1938, 'The scheme of Australian defence is related to the wider pattern of Empire defence, and its fundamental basis is Empire sea-power and the Singapore Naval Base'.

A report of the Joint Services Sub-Committee of 1937 reveals current attitudes to the role of Darwin and north Australia in any likely conflict. The assessment did not differ in essentials from assessments made at the turn of the century. It took little account of technological developments since that time, particularly those in military aviation.

In a war with Japan, Darwin will be of considerable importance as an operational base at which is established a strategic resource of fuel oil... Darwin is nearer than any other Australian port to a possible Japanese base. The probability of attack in the early stages of war is considerable... As Darwin is an isolated port, providing to an enemy neither a jumping off point, nor an advanced base for serious aggression against the vital areas of Australia, it follows that the object of any attack on Darwin must be for the destruction of the base facilities of that port and

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18 Commonwealth Hansard, 27 April 1938, p.561.
to deny their use by our naval forces. Therefore, any attack on Darwin would most likely take the form of a raid.

In these circumstances, it appears that the scale of attack is likely to increase as the naval importance of Darwin to the British fleet grows, and as defensive measures and naval facilities are developed.19

The report suggested that the most likely form of attack was still considered to be a bombing attack by up to sixteen cruiser-borne aircraft. Any land attack would be one by about 1,000 men from sampans, unaccompanied by artillery and armed solely with rifles and light automatics. Darwin’s defences were built accordingly.

To some in positions of authority even the few initiatives already taken in northern Australia seemed unnecessary. A minute of the Defence Committee dated 12 March, 1937 concerning the report of the Joint Services Sub-Committee indicated that ‘The Chief of the Naval Staff was of opinion that as the danger of war with Japan would tend to diminish after 1937, the measures necessary for the improvement of the defences of Darwin should be spread over a number of years and should be related to the development of Darwin generally’.20 This view reflected the wishful thinking of the British Admiralty in the success of the government’s appeasement strategy in Europe, and suggested that Japan’s deep involvement in China made any further aggression in Asia unlikely.

However, despite the optimists in charge of British foreign affairs, war in Europe became increasingly probable during the latter years of the ‘thirties.

The German army had marched into Austria in 1938, and threatened Czechoslovakia in September. On 29 September, the Munich pact was concluded between Britain, Germany, France and Italy whereby part of Czechoslovakia was ceded to Germany, but this failed to halt German expansion. On 31 March, 1939, Britain drew the line on the policy of appeasement that it had pursued since 1935, when it guaranteed the independence of Poland. Because of Britain’s heightened resolve, the

19 AAC, A816/1, 14/301/14.
20 AAC, A816/1, 14/301/14.
Defending the Northern Gateway

German/Soviet non-aggression pact signed on 23 August, 1939 was particularly ominous. The reason for it became evident when Germany invaded Poland on 1 September.
CHAPTER 7

IMPENDING WAR, 1939-42

The world slipped into war with its eyes open. Indeed, many nations, other than Germany, Italy and Japan, had been making active preparations for it since 1935.

The extent to which the deteriorating world situation concerned the Lyons government was evident when on 24 March 1938 the Prime Minister announced his government's new defence programme. While defence spending had increased steadily during the 'thirties, Lyons proposed to spend an additional £63,000,000 over the succeeding three years.1

Yet defence policy at the time remained as it had done throughout the century.

Our defence problem as a small nation is insoluble without Empire co-operation. We can share in the common naval defence of the Commonwealth, but we cannot provide naval forces sufficient for our security. We can provide forces for local defence as a deterrent to aggression, and as a means of holding out until support is forthcoming, but we cannot defeat a powerful aggressor single-handed. If the Empire is to survive, and if the independence of its members is to be preserved, we must stand together.2

This policy was soon to be put to the test.

What so many Australian strategists had feared happened. On 3 September, 1939, two days after Germany's invasion of Poland, Britain declared war on Germany.

Because Britain was at war so, too, was Australia.

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1 Commonwealth Hansard, 6 December 1938, p.2754.
2 Ibid., p.2755.
FIGURE 3

Far Eastern Theatre of World War II

However, despite the rearmament programme, Australia was ill-prepared for what lay ahead. The assessment of Horner was that '... when war broke out in Europe Australia's skeleton cruiser force was barely sufficient to protect trade on the Australia Station from more than sporadic surface attack. The airforce was small with obsolete equipment. The rapidly expanding army possessed little heavy equipment and had basic infantry equipment sufficient only for one division'. Of the Army, in particular, war historian Gavin Long said that 'It was fundamentally a defensive force intended if war broke out to go to its stations or man the coastal forts and await the arrival of an invader. ... The measures that had been taken in the few years of 're-armament' were insignificant in the face of the threat offered by two aggressive Powers, one of which desired to master Europe, the other East Asia'.

And while Australia hastened to recruit a second Australian Imperial Force (AIF) to fight the British cause, there was no guarantee that Britain would be able to secure its own interests in the east let alone those of Australia.

For a time, the war, like that thirty years earlier, was fought on the other side of the world. However, conditions to the north became increasingly ominous, particularly after 27 September, 1940, when Japan entered a tri-partite pact with Germany and Italy.

A Far East Defence Conference was held at Singapore from 22-31 October, 1941 to assess the situation in the region. Officially there was little reason for concern. However, Australian military advisers who attended were alarmed at the evident unpre paredness of the supposedly impregnable base, and sceptical of its ability to withstand a concerted attack.

War in the Northern Territory

More than in most regions of Australia, the inhabitants of the Northern Territory had long been inured to the idea of an approaching war. There had been an increasing military presence there since 1932. Thus, Australia's declaration of war on 3 September 1939 made little difference

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to Territorians; day-to-day activities continued as they had done before. The period of the 'phony war' was longer in the Territory than elsewhere.

As with their fathers a quarter of a century earlier, men hastened to join the armed forces for service overseas. Soon after Australia's declaration of war, it had been decided that there should be a Northern Territory section - a mechanized battery - in the force of 20,000 men then being established. By 6 October, seventy Territorians had sought enlistment. Men travelled great distances so that they might join the second AIF. The Standard carried the stories of several of them. G.L. Terry was working at Finke in central Australia, when he heard of the outbreak of war. He jumped the rattler for the 140 miles to Alice Springs. He rode on motor trucks and the mail lorry for the next 650 miles to Birdum, where he again jumped the rattler for Darwin. From Tennant Creek he was accompanied by G. Williams who was carrying his swag across Alexandria Station when he heard of the war, and he immediately set out on foot to enlist. R.G. Milton, a station hand of Spring Creek Station in the Kimberleys, resigned within a hour of hearing of the war, and walked 225 kilometres to Wyndham to take the steamer to Darwin to enlist there.

But there was not the same sense of adventure and crusading which had characterized those who enlisted in the Great War. Of the seventy who sought enlistment in the Northern Territory unit during the October, only twelve were Darwin residents. And the first eager volunteers had to join the Darwin militia unit which had been formed in August 1939, because at that time the army was not prepared to receive them. There were many men who volunteered at Alice Springs in October, and who were then given medical examinations, but who had not been called up by the following May: this made for dissatisfaction and a dampening of the ardour of those who had hastened to volunteer.

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5 Northern Standard, 6 October 1939, p.4.
6 Ibid., 17 October 1939, p.3.
7 Ibid., 11 and 25 August 1939.
8 AAD, F1, 42/38.
Darwin's Role in the new war

In contrast to the last war, however, where the centre of conflict was half a world away, in the late 'thirties there was every indication that Darwin would be closely involved.

A minute of the Defence Committee of 18 September, 1940 elaborated on what was then considered to be Darwin's role in any ensuing conflict.

At present, Darwin is of value as a naval and air base (secured by Army units) for forces actively engaged in guarding trade routes... The provision of a secure base at Darwin is of paramount strategic importance in providing facilities to develop Naval and Air action in conjunction with operations developed from the main base at Singapore.

Even if this eventuality does not arise, Darwin is still operationally important as a defended port since, as such, its easy possession is denied to an enemy who requires to use it for further operations against vital areas elsewhere. Further, the naval and air defences located there deny or restrict an enemy's freedom of movement in Northern Australian waters.9

The Navy

In accordance with the Singapore Strategy reaffirmed at the Imperial Conference of 1937, the Navy was to have the preeminent role in the defence of Australia in the event of war. A memo of the Secretary of the Naval Board, of 7 March 1939 affirmed that in the opinion of the Board,

... the essential requirements of the Australian defence are a Navy to maintain in conjunction with the Air Force the control of sea communications, an Army adequate to deal with raids, and an Air Force strong enough to co-operate with the Army and to locate and attack raiders by land and sea.

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9 AAC, A1308/1, 739/1/40.
Defending the Northern Gateway

[Furthermore] The Naval Board would view with grave concern any departure from these principles and the dangerous lack of balance in the government's programme which would result therefrom.\(^10\)

Yet, although the 1937 Imperial Conference affirmed that Darwin was to be the South Eastern base of the Malay Barrier balancing that of Singapore,\(^11\) little was done to give substance to this policy.

The naval build-up in Darwin began during 1939 following the acquisition of numbers of properties in the vicinity of Cavanagh Street and the Esplanade. Several defensive works were also undertaken.

An indicator loop was installed across the entrance to the harbour to detect approaching vessels and a submarine boom was erected. Approval for the construction of the anti-submarine boom was given by the War Cabinet on 26 August, 1940. It was to comprise a boom two miles in length, requiring four boom-working vessels.\(^12\)

Early in 1942 the Naval Establishment at Darwin was under the control of Captain Thomas. It comprised shore-based services for the control of the fuel-oil installation, and an establishment responsible for the anti-submarine boom.

Defence Works

The build-up of troops and the prosecution of the various defence works was good for the local economies and boded well for the future, requiring capital investment in construction that might have taken decades to secure in other circumstances. The needs of a rapidly increasing number of troops in the Northern Territory required a great deal of investment in essential services.

In October 1939, the military officials explained the small number of Darwin volunteers for the second AIF on the fact that so many of the adult males in the town were engaged on defence works and essential services. Certainly there were many and varied defence works

\(^{10}\) AAC, A816/1, 14/301/108.


\(^{12}\) AAC, A1308/1, 793/1/40.
under way at this time. Work continued on the construction of the dam on the upper Manton River, permitting reticulated water into Darwin in 1940. The new hospital at Kahlin was extended in 1940 because of the increased demand for hospital accommodation occasioned by the increased population in Darwin. It opened for civilian use in January 1942. In December 1940, the 19th Army General Hospital was established at Berrimah. And numerous dwellings were constructed to help to overcome the shortage of accommodation for workers in Darwin.

Until April 1940, the officer commanding the Darwin area was Lieutenant Colonel H.C.H. Robertson. It was his task to select sites in the Top End for military installations.

The Track

Before the war Darwin was virtually an island, accessible only by sea and air. Robertson was concerned at this, and in 1939 strongly urged the upgrading of the overland link to the south, in the event that sea routes to Darwin should be disrupted. Receiving approval for this in August 1940, he immediately had work begin on forming the road from Tennant Creek to Larrimah. The traffic between Alice Springs and the goldfields at Tennant Creek meant that there was already a reasonable road south from Tennant Creek, but the road north remained an ill-defined track.

This '90 day wonder' was performed by construction teams from the South Australian Highways Commission, the Queensland Main Roads Commission and the New South Wales Department of Main Roads. Concurrently, the Department of Interior, with D.D. Smith its local engineer, carried out improvements on the road between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. The new road to the railhead at Larrimah was completed by December 1940 and was ready for the first military convoy early in 1941.

Though an adequate road in normal circumstances, it deteriorated rapidly under the constant convoys plying north and south, particularly during the Wet. When it was built the road was considered only as a

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13 Judith Baddeley, 'History of Health Services in the Northern Territory', processed typescript, 20 January 1976, p.120.
14 AAC, A816/1, 34/301/77.
15 AWM, 54, 625/7/12.
complementary, though more secure, supply route to Darwin than that by sea. After February 1942 it became the only supply line and received considerably more traffic because of this.

Because of its strategic significance, the decision was made in 1942 to strengthen and to seal the highway between Larrimah and Alice Springs along with that between Tennant Creek and Mount Isa. This task was given to the Civil Constructional Corps of the Allied Works Council.

The Allied Works Council (AWC) was formed early in 1942 to oversee all construction work required for the war effort including the building of the many roads airfields and camps, and to co-ordinate the construction agencies of the State and Federal governments. The Civil Constructional Corps became one of the chief arms of the AWC. It was created in April 1942 to ensure that skilled men were not lost to construction projects as they were completed and so that the Allied Works Council was assured of its own labour force. Many construction workers already working on construction projects were enrolled in the Corps, others volunteered, while as many as a third were called up for service.

**Darwin Overland Maintenance Force**

Those whose task it was to run the convoys between the Alice Springs and Larrimah railheads comprised the Darwin Overland Maintenance Force (DOMF). The advance party of this unit moved into Alice Springs on 2 September 1940.16 The remainder of the unit under the command of Lieut-Colonel N.M. Loutit arrived a week later. On 9 September, within twenty-four hours of the main body of troops arriving in Alice Springs, the first convoy was dispatched to Darwin with supplies that had been railed from the south.

Originally there were about 730 officers and men in DOMF, the main unit being a transport company of fourteen officers and 606 other ranks, equipped with 150 three-tonne trucks. Later, as the north-south road became the only means of supplying the forces in the north, DOMF

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was expanded to 8,000 personnel and 3,000 vehicles.\textsuperscript{17} And at any given time Alice Springs was also the staging point for other troops travelling to or from the north. During the life of DOMF from 8 September 1940 to 30 October 1944, the number of troops that passed through Alice Springs totalled 194,852.\textsuperscript{18}

DOMF and the highway heading north out of Alice Springs proved to be of immense value during the middle years of the war. Normally three convoys, each of thirty trucks, left Alice Springs each day for Larrimah, to return eight days later. Staging camps between Alice Springs and Larrimah were established at Ti Tree Well, New Barrow Creek, Cabbage Gum Bore, Banka Banka, Elliott and Daly Waters. Supplies for civilians living north of Alice Springs, and those who were not employed in defence work were also carried by the Army up the track, with the civilians, chiefly pastoralists, being responsible for ensuring its transport to their stations. The administration's Inland Transport Service lifted supplies from Newcastle Waters to Wave Hill and other localities.\textsuperscript{19} Those civilians to the north of Daly Waters simply purchased supplies from the nearest army supply depot.

Communications

In 1941, following Cabinet approval in March, work began on the installation of a telephone and an upgraded telegraph link between Darwin and Adelaide.\textsuperscript{20} This was undertaken as a matter of urgency at the request of the Department of the Army to improve communications with the south. The work was completed by May, 1944.\textsuperscript{21}

Army Farms

Lieutenant Colonel Robertson was also instrumental in purchasing the first of the army farms at the Adelaide River in 1940. This was the forerunner of a number of farms which were established to

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.121.
\textsuperscript{19} AAC, A431, 48/1390.
\textsuperscript{20} AAC, A431, 47/342.
\textsuperscript{21} AASA, D960, 704, docket dated 17 May 1944.
Defending the Northern Gateway

provide fresh food for the troops in the Northern Territory. Given the failure of so many agricultural enterprises in the Territory to that time, it is noteworthy that by 1944 these farms were supplying food for more than 55,000 persons. This success gave the lie to the idea that the Territory was unsuitable for agricultural purposes.

The Army

Although Darwin's role in defence policy was to be primarily a naval one, its defence was to be largely in the hands of the Army. At the outbreak of war this comprised the Darwin Garrison and the Darwin Mobile Force. However, in the early days of the war the best of the officers and NCO's left to take up positions in the AIF. Efforts were made to recruit and train a part-time militia, but these proved less than satisfactory.

Soon after the outbreak of war the Army's command structure was changed and Northern Territory became a separate command base - 7th Military District. While formally approved in October, 1939 Lieutenant-Colonel H.C.H. Robertson who was appointed as the commandant had been in charge in Darwin since March. However, it was yet some time before the new arrangement became effective.

In the short term efforts were made to strengthen Darwin's defences by having units of the 7th Division stage through the area, the 2/15th Battalion from July 1940 followed by the 2/25th Battalion in October.

In the meantime changes were also made to Darwin's regular defence force. On 20 August the DMF was disbanded. The artillery personnel became part of a new field battery, while the infantry became

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23 AAC, A659, 45/1/1448.
24 June Bauer, 'Army Farms in the Northern Territory', AWM, MSS, No. 1091.
26 Ibid., p.30.
the nucleus of a new unit raised in New South Wales, the Darwin Infantry Battalion, later, on 1 November, 1941, renamed the 19th Battalion.

The headquarters staff of the new 7th Military District left Sydney aboard the Zealandia on 22 November, 1940. This force included 14 AA Battery, 18 Field Battery, and 54 AA Company, and along with clerical and medical personnel numbered 582 all ranks.

A reassessment of the military situation in April had suggested that the fixed defences were inadequate and that month approval was given for the installation of an additional six-inch battery.27 At the same time efforts were made to hasten the installation of two 9.2-inch guns, expected to be delivered in December, 1941 and February, 1942.

The forces available to the General Officer Commanding early in 1942 included a Fortress Command sector to operate within the Darwin Peninsula, a Covering Force charged with the defence of beaches between the Howard River and Ludmilla Creek and a District Reserve concentrated in the Noonamah area which was to be used in any counter attack against the enemy once the direction of this attack was known.28

The backbone of Fortress Command was 19 Battalion, since returned to Darwin, one company of 43 Battalion and a United States' unit, the 148 Field Artillery Regiment less one battalion; this latter unit, along with the 147th Field Artillery Regiment had been en route to reinforce American forces in the Philippines before the rapidly deteriorating situation there had had them diverted to Darwin. Fixed defences comprised four six-inch MkXI batteries at East Point, two six-inch Mk XI batteries at Emery Point and two four-inch Mk VII at West Point. These were complemented by 2 AA Battery at Darwin, 14 AA Battery at Fanny Bay, 22 AA Battery at Berrimah and 54 AA Battery at Elliott Point. The bulk of the Covering Force headquartered at Parap comprised 27 Battalion and 43 Battalion less one company. The District Reserve with headquarters at Winnellie, included 19 Machine Gun Regiment, 7 Battalion, 8 Battalion and the US 147 Field Artillery Regiment.

On 10 July, 1941 Brigadier WAB Steele, prepared a detailed plan for the defence of Darwin. The role of the army was to protect the oil

27 AAC, A1608/1, K61/3/1.
28 AWM, 54, 422/7/8.
storage in Darwin and the air fields, and to maintain land communication with the South. The likely form of attack for which he deployed the troops under him was by 'Cruisers and seaborne aircraft and/or a landing in force'.

**RAAF**

In June, 1940 No 12 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, was reorganised into a station headquarters under command of Wing Commander C. Eaton, and two Squadrons, Nos 12 and 13, in accordance with the plans for the defence of Darwin drawn up in 1937. No 13 Squadron was re-equipped with Hudson bombers. For a time both squadrons continued to operate from the civil aerodrome at Fannie Bay. At the end of June, 1940, the Royal Australian Air Force strength was 30 officers and 212 other ranks: the following month it received 182 reinforcements.

The RAAF headquarters moved with No 13 Squadron to the new military airfield in August, 1940. No 12 Squadron remained for a time at the civil airfield but all RAAF operations were consolidated at the new aerodrome by April, 1941. During this time the squadrons were chiefly concerned with 'shipping escort, seaward reconnaissance and coastwise patrols, which included keeping a watch on the Japanese pearling luggers, significantly still based in Australian or adjacent waters'. To support and extend the utility of this patrol work staging bases were established at Drysdale and Port Hedland in Western Australia and at the mission station at Millingimbi in the east. At the same time a major replenishing centre was established at Katherine, 340 km south of Darwin and a satellite base at Batchelor, 80 km to the south.

From May, 1941, control of all RAAF units was exercised from Northern Area Headquarters in Townsville.

At the end of 1941 the force at Darwin still comprised the two squadrons, one for reconnaissance and one of general purpose bombers. It was a force in which Colonel W.C.D. Veale could put little faith. In an assessment of the situation on 12 January, 1942 he observed,

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29 AAC, A816, 54, 422/7/8.
31 Ibid.,
At the present time our own Air Force based on Darwin is well dispersed and the total number of planes available to meet any invasion is 12 Wirraways. These are classed as 'General Purpose' type, are obsolete as service aircraft; but could be effective against merchantmen and other lightly protected vessels. In the face of enemy fighter opposition, however, their use would be very limited. . . .

The estimated enemy strength of 132 aircraft of various categories compared with our own RAAF force of 12 Wirraways . . . leave an overwhelming disparity in favour of the enemy and furthermore our Anti-Aircraft Artillery layout is designed to meet level bombing and is considered capable of disorganising an air attack of from 10 to 20 aircraft.32

Because of the perceived vulnerability of the RAAF aerodrome at Darwin, construction was already well advanced on a new military aerodrome at Batchelor, eighty kilometres south of Darwin. At the time when Veale made his assessment, the aerodrome at Batchelor was already being used as a staging point for large US long distance bombers.

**Internal Security**

Once Australia was at war all who were considered to be enemy aliens living in the Northern Territory were interned. In mid-1940, efforts were made to round up the many Italians who were working on the mining fields at Hatches Creek, Wauchope and Tennant Creek,33 and in July they were sent to the internment camp at Tatura near Shepparton in Victoria.34 This had a disastrous impact upon production from the mines, much of it necessary for war work. Chinese workers from Nauru were brought in to work the mines, but they proved to be unequal to the Italians.

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32 AWM, 54, 625/7/10.
33 AAD, F1, 42/243.
34 AAD, F1, 42/38.
FIGURE 4

Location Map of Darwin

FIGURE 5

Wartime Darwin, Showing Defences and Related Facilities

Those 69 Japanese who were in Darwin on the day that Japan entered the war were arrested and later interned in camps in the southern States on the order of Major-General Blake.35

Morale

The war was a long time in coming to the Northern Territory. This sapped the morale of troops and long-standing Territorians. Pastoralists complained that troops passing through station properties disturbed cattle and left gates open.36 Troops complained of the inactivity in the tropical Top End.

Members of the AIF who had volunteered for overseas service and who were stationed in the Territory, were particularly grieved that they did not have the same pay and pension privileges as those of their comrades overseas.37 In September 1941, matters came to a head with a weekend of 'the wildest scenes that Darwin has seen for many years'.38 Pay weekends had always been a rowdy time, but on this occasion, an all-in fight occurred which involved soldiers and civilians at the stadium on the Friday. On the Saturday, a riot occurred in the heart of the town. 'The public bar of the Victoria Hotel was stormed and ransacked. Nearby shop windows were smashed and looted'.39 The government subsequently promised that 'anomalies would be cleared up', and that members of the AIF serving in Darwin 'would get a fair deal from the Government'.40 However, throughout the war, one of the greatest problems encountered by military commanders was that of maintaining morale. The fact that war games, such as the 'attack' on Darwin in August 1941, invariably ended with the attackers being repulsed,41 did little to prepare the troops for the reality of war when it came.

36 AAD, Fl, 42/243.
37 Northern Standard, 3 October 1941, p.7.
38 Ibid., 2 September 1941, p.6.
39 Ibid.
40 Commonwealth Government, Digest of Decisions and Announcements and Important Speeches, 10 November 1941.
41 Northern Standard, 8 August 1941, p.4.
Civilian/Military Relations

The increasing military presence in Darwin and the demands of the military authorities inevitably promoted tensions between civilians and military.

The suggestion that a Defence Co-ordination Committee should be established was a sound one. However, despite the persistent pleas of Administrator Abbott for civilian representation on this committee, membership of the Committee that was approved on 30 January was reserved for military personnel.42 There was provision for a representative of the Administrator 'to attend meetings whenever matters concerning civil activities were under discussion, and to keep the Administrator in close touch with defence activities', but it was not an arrangement to satisfy Abbott's sense of propriety.

The Darwin waterfront was another destabilizing factor in the Top End which promoted ill-feeling between civilians and military personnel. These problems became acute after American forces were established at Darwin. They were unfamiliar with Australian labour relations, and sought to have the army unload supplies.

The increased strategic value of Darwin and the general war emergency meant that inward freight increased by 500 per cent during 1940.43 The inadequate port and wharf facilities meant that there were difficulties in handling this freight, and these difficulties were compounded by the numerous industrial disputes engineered by the left-wing wharf labourers. They unsuccessfully sought a special tropical allowance,44 and later a war loading,45 and indeed, employed any stratagem in order to hamper the war effort which they branded an 'imperialistic war'. Defence authorities recommended that military personnel should be solely responsible for the handling of military supplies, but the conservative Menzies government was 'plain scared' of the effect that this might have on labour relations throughout Australia.46

42 AAC, A816/1, 11/301/208.
44 Northern Standard, 16 April 1941, p.5.
45 Ibid., 22 July 1941, p.3.
46 Hasluck, Government and the People, p.139.
Fortunately, circumstances changed after the entry of the Soviet Union into the war on the side of the Allies in June 1941. Thereafter, the left-wing militants came to view the war rather as a 'holy war' which they should support. This change of attitude was made easier by the defeat of the conservative government at the federal elections on 7 October 1941, and the fact that Australia's war effort came under the control of a Labor government led by John Curtin. In December 1941, Eddy Ward, the Labor Minister for Labour and National Service, flew to Darwin, and succeeded in having the wharf labourers agree to work longer hours and to permit the introduction of additional wharf labourers from Queensland. These 'flying wharfies' arrived in Darwin soon after, but were able to effect little change. The government's decision on 7 February to appoint a Port Superintendent to direct all activities on the Darwin waterfront, was also a belated effort.

Civilian Darwin had traditionally been riven by factions. Problems associated with this were brought into relief in the period of uncertainty prior to Darwin's entry into the war, and had a bearing on the events of 19 February 1942. But, at a time when war was imminent, a fact which was highlighted by the Cabinet decision of 12 December 1941 to evacuate all women and children from Darwin, civil leaders in the town were embroiled in an argument about air raid precautions. During the war games of August 1941, the role of the Air Raid Precaution (ARP) committee was dismissed as little more than a joke by civilian and military personnel alike. Following this, the committee stepped up its pressure on the Administrator for some form of legal status. Judge Wells bought into the problem on behalf of the ARP committee, though he strongly criticized much of the advice which had been given by it. Later, on 23 January, members of the ARP committee threatened to resign unless Abbott gave them legal authority for their work. Unsatisfied on this score, all except the Chief Warden and the permanent officer resigned on 26 January 1942. Wells carried the fight to Attorney-General Evatt, and Minister of Interior Collings in Canberra, but to no avail. Early in 1942 there was no formal ARP organization in Darwin, though former members had agreed to do what they could in any emergency.

47 AAC, A659, 48/184.
48 Hasluck, Government and the People, p.139.
49 AAD, E475.
Darwin as a Base for Offshore Operations

The deteriorating war situation in the Far East meant that Darwin became increasingly important as a base through which men and equipment moved. Its utility was also recognised by Americans who did not share the British faith in the impregnability of Singapore and who had begun a programme to strengthen the defences of the Philippines.

In March, 1941, Commander Marshall Collins arrived in Darwin to gather information that might be useful to the United States Navy. Later, from September, the new RAAF base was used as a staging point by heavy B17 bombers of the USAAF en route to Manila.50

Australian forces also passed through Darwin to theatres of war beyond.

In February, 1941 during negotiations with the Dutch, the Australians had agreed to help defend Dutch Territory in Ambon and Timor. Negotiations were also held with the Portuguese, but these were not completed before the end of the year.51

In accordance with these negotiations No 13 Squadron of Hudsons flew to Ambon on 6 and 7 December. Three days later, 'Sparrow Force' comprising mainly 2/40th Battalion and 2/1st Heavy Battery, and with the 2/2nd Independent Company, left Darwin to garrison Koepang in Dutch Timor. Two days later still, 'Gull Force', essentially 2/21st Battalion, embarked for Ambon.

The Siege of Singapore

Until December, 1941 the defence of areas remote from Australia continued to be seen as the essence of Australia's defence policy, and until that time many in positions of authority hoped that war with Japan might yet be averted.

It was evident that Australia could no longer look solely to Britain to defend it in the face of a major military power. Indeed, for some time Australia's representatives abroad had been endeavouring to

51 Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 538-9.
influence British-American policy towards Japan. In January, 1940, R.G. Casey, Minister for Supply and Development, had been appointed Minister to the United States of America, Australia's first senior diplomatic post, and later that same year Sir John Latham was appointed Australian Minister to Tokyo. Australia's diplomatic activities counted for little. Their representatives could do little more than watch the Japanese-American negotiations.

However, the spectre of Darwin's direct involvement in the war became a distinct possibility after Japan's declaration of war on 7 December 1941, and the devastation of the United States' Pacific Surface Fleet at Pearl Harbor. Almost simultaneously, Japan launched air attacks against Guam and Singapore and her troops invaded Thailand and Malaya. Three days later, the British capital ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk off the Malayan coast, the same day that Guam fell. The situation in the Philippines became desperate, and the first of the USAAF heavy bombers returned to Darwin on 17 December.

The sinking of the British capital ships by means of air attack, in particular, exposed the weak foundations upon which Australia's defence policy had been built. However, this was little consolation for those who had warned of this very eventuality.

Fortunately for Australia, Japan's actions brought it into conflict with the United States; here was a powerful ally whose self-interest in the region was evident, and one that might help secure Australia. On 27 December, 1941, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin made his now famous appeal to the United States for help.

The Japanese advance continued virtually unchecked. On 23 January, 1942, Rabaul fell. Then on 15 February 1942, the unthinkable happened. Within a matter of days after the Japanese launched their attack on the island, Singapore surrendered and with it Australia's 8th Division. The keystone of Australia's defence policy had been broken. It was evident that Australia's security must now rest with America rather than Britain.

**Fortress Australia**

Japan's rapid conquest of South-East Asia ushered in a period of acute anxiety for Australians, particularly because, for a time, there were no powerful allies who could render immediate assistance. It was a
fortnight after the bombing of Pearl Harbour before an Allied conference was organised in Singapore on 18 December to consider the co-ordination of defensive efforts in the South West Pacific, and the end of December before there was agreement on the creation of the American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) Command under Britain's General Sir Archibald Wavell.\footnote{Hudson, W.J. and Stokes, H.J.W., \textit{Documents on Australian Foreign Policy, 1937-49}, Vol. V: July 1941-June 1942, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1982), pp.xii-xiii.} Australia was not included in the ABDA area until 23 January, 1942.

Emergency procedures were implemented in the north. The evacuation of civilians from Darwin began late in 1941. On 12 December, five days after the commencement of the Pacific war, the War Cabinet recommended the evacuation of the 1,066 women and 969 children from Darwin and the surrounding area.\footnote{Administrator's Report for years ending 30 June 1942, processed typescript, copy in Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide.} Within a week, 750 women and children had been evacuated by sea. The last ship left Darwin on 15 February 1942. The last evacuee plane flew out on 18 February.

Efforts were also made to transfer administration records to centres in the south.\footnote{AAD, F1, 42/11.} On 30 January 1942, the records of the Lands Titles Office and the Lands Branch were transferred to Alice Springs. On 10 and 11 February, the records of the Mines Branch were transferred to Tennant Creek, and on 11 February, those of the Native Affairs Branch were taken to Mataranka.

Given the rapid change in circumstances in Malaya the situation in early 1942 appeared grim. 'It must be considered', wrote Col W.C.D. Veale, the commander of 'Sparrow Force', on 12 January, 1942, 'that Darwin may be bombed at any time, as a Japanese carrier accompanied by destroyers has been seen in the vicinity of the CELEBES. This appears to be the only possible form of attack at present, as Darwin is well outside the range of Japanese occupied bases. The fact must not be lost sight of, however, that the Japanese are more than half-way down the Malayan Peninsula on both East and West coasts'.\footnote{AWM, 54, 625/7/10.}
In the three days following 20 February, Veale's men bore the brunt of the Japanese invasion of Timor. Though he and about 200 men escaped to join the 2/2nd Independent Company in a long guerilla war, the bulk of his force surrendered on 23 February.\textsuperscript{56}

The first weeks of 1942 were traumatic ones for all Australians. The defence policy in which successive governments had placed so much faith was in tatters. Australia stood virtually alone in the path of an apparently invincible foe. The inadequacy of its defence force was evident.

\textsuperscript{56} Powell, \textit{Shadow's Edge}, p.64.
CHAPTER 8

BRACED FOR INVASION, 1942

The event for which civilians and military personnel at Darwin had been preparing for so long - however inefficiently - occurred on the morning of 19 February 1942.

On that day, Darwin was devastated by two aerial bombardments, in which at least 243 lives were lost. The first raid occurred shortly before 10.00 a.m., and was flown by the same carrier-based force that had destroyed the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941.

This first attack was directed primarily at the town and harbour, both of which were taken completely by surprise. Only two Japanese planes failed to return to their carriers. At that time, fifty-five ships were in the harbour, several of them recently returned from an abortive attempt to reinforce troops on Java: eight of these were sunk, with many others being damaged in some way. The new airfield was strafed and the squadron of ten American P-40s, at the time staging through Darwin to Java, was destroyed. The raid lasted about forty minutes.

The devastation that the air attack wrought underscored the miscalculation that generations of defence experts had made. The defence of Darwin had been based on defence against naval attack, with the air force charged with providing early warning. The oil tanks were supposedly secure behind the defences provided by the six-inch and two 9.2-inch batteries. All suggestions about the possibility of a major air attack from carrier based planes had been dismissed. Consequently, except for the anti-aircraft batteries the town was defenceless against air attack and the oil tanks very vulnerable. It was only chance that the squadron of P-40s was at that time in Darwin. However, because of the lack of an early warning they were taken by complete surprise.

Because of the lack of any warning there was virtually no air defence available for the town except the anti-aircraft batteries and five of the P-40s which remained patrolling while the others landed for refuelling. However, the airborne P-40s were taken by complete surprise,
four were shot down immediately; those on the ground that managed to get off were shot down before they could engage the enemy.¹

A second attack struck two hours after the first. This force of fifty-four land-based bombers from the Celebes, directed their attack at the RAAF airfield which they pounded with accurate pattern bombing. Not even the most pessimistic scenario had suggested that Darwin might be attacked by land-based bombers.

There was little loss of life during this second raid. However, the airfield was all but destroyed along with six Hudsons and a USAAF Liberator bomber at the time in transit through Darwin. This second raid destroyed the morale of those who were so badly shaken by the first raid. Many civilians and service personnel fled Darwin.

The devastation of Darwin, and the concomitant loss of life was an indictment on the lack of preparedness of those who were meant to have been defending Darwin. The likelihood of an attack should have been anticipated given the proximity of the Japanese forces. Colonel Veale had warned of the possibility only a month earlier. Moreover, only five days before, on 14 February, a convoy had left Darwin to reinforce allied troops in Timor. It had been attacked by Japanese aircraft, and had been forced to return on 18 February. Yet, early warnings of the approaching Japanese were ignored. The alarm was first raised by Father McGrath of Bathurst Island, who radioed authorities soon after 0930 hours on 19 February, that enemy planes were passing overhead en route to Darwin. This message was passed to the RAAF at 0937 hours. But it was almost 1000 hours, at the time the first bombs were falling, before the public alarm was given. The early warning may not have staved off the destruction of the town but it may have saved many lives. It would have permitted ships in the harbour to weigh anchor, and it would have enabled citizens to take adequate shelter. There would have been no wharf labourers at risk had adequate warning been given.

Members of the armed forces were also largely responsible for exacerbating the confusion that pervaded Darwin immediately after the second raid. When Wing-Commander Griffith ordered men at the airfield to disperse and to regroup a little down the track, many simply cleared

out. Lockwood, who was a witness of the bombing, noted that 278 men were still missing four days after the bombing.\(^2\)

The story of the bombing of Darwin has been told elsewhere in detail.\(^3\) It is unnecessary here to do more than make mention of the major issues, because, despite the drama of the occasion, and the real fear of invasion that it engendered, the bombing of Darwin was of little consequence to Australia's war effort or to the Territory's history.

Aftermath

Australians elsewhere took some time to learn of the reality of the attack on Darwin. Prime Minister Curtin assured the nation that, 'In this first battle on Australian soil it will be a source of pride to the public to know that the armed forces and the civilians comported themselves with the gallantry that is traditional in the people of our stock'.\(^4\) The following day, the Minister for Air, Mr Drakeford, claimed that 'as far as could be ascertained, there were 39 casualties (15 persons killed and 24 wounded)'.\(^5\) If this statement was made in all honesty, it denotes great confusion in the system of communications between Darwin and Sydney. However, after the initial confusion had been resolved, it was evident that there had been only fifteen civilian deaths in the town - ten of which occurred at the post office. Only after the completion of an official enquiry did the government admit to the number of deaths in the order of 240 - even then Curtin claimed that damage to the town 'was very small'.\(^6\) Five days later, the *Bulletin* repeated these details claiming that in the three services, only eight men had been killed.\(^7\)

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Lowe Enquiry

That the government was concerned about events in Darwin was evident, when, on 3 March 1942, Mr Justice Lowe of the Victorian Supreme Court was appointed to enquire into them. His enquiry achieved nothing but the recording of firsthand accounts of the bombing. Though it must be understood that because he conducted his enquiry at a time when many believed that invasion was imminent, his chief concern was to complete the enquiry as rapidly as possible. Lowe heard witnesses at Darwin from 5-10 March and in Melbourne from 19-25 March. His main conclusion was that in all areas, there was a decided lack of leadership from those in positions of authority.

The day of 19 February was perhaps not the occasion for pride which Curtin had suggested. While civilians sought refuge away from the front line, the looting of abandoned homes and premises commenced on the evening of 19 February, and continued for several weeks. This was led by members of the Provost Corps. It was still taking place while Mr Justice Lowe was in Darwin conducting his enquiry.

Darwin and other centres in the Top End were attacked on sixty-four occasions between March 1942 and the end of November 1943; the last raid was on 12 November. On no other occasion, however, was there loss of life and property comparable to that on 19 February.

Despite the fears of those in Darwin at the time and in Australia generally, the Japanese attack on Darwin was not a prelude to invasion. The Japanese sought only to destroy the port and military installations, thereby preventing Darwin’s use as a staging point through which the allied forces might oppose Japanese aggression against Timor. In the short term it succeeded admirably.

8 AAC, A431, 46/253.
9 AAD, F1, 42/12.
10 Lockwood, Australia’s Pearl Harbour, p.223.
Strategy

The bombing of Darwin was but one more setback to the Allied interests in the region to Australia's north and north-west. Though Australia had been included in the ABDA area on 23 January, 1942, the speed with which the Japanese advanced throughout the region quickly rendered the ABDA arrangement meaningless, particularly after the capitulation of Java on 9 March.

The success of the Japanese promoted a sudden reversal in the policy governing the deployment of Australia's troops. At the end of 1942, four AIF divisions were overseas. Yet against the wishes of British Prime Minister Churchill, the new Prime Minister Curtin insisted that three of these be recalled to Australia: it was a rare instance of independent defence policy exercised by Australia. On their return these troops were used to reinforce the defence of the more resource-rich and industrial south-eastern Australia, in accordance with principles long-held by Australia's service chiefs. There were garrisons in the remote parts of Australia to repel raids, but they were not expected to retard any major invasion for any great length of time. It was determined to reinforce the garrisons at Townsville and Fremantle, but not immediately those at Darwin, Port Moresby or in Tasmania. Soon thereafter, however, even the deployment of troops was taken out of Australian hands.

The collapse of the ABDA Command marked the effective end of British involvement in the defence of Australia. Thereafter the strategy for the defence of Australia, and the place that the Northern Territory might play in this, was determined by Washington and American service chiefs.

On 9 March, 1942 President Roosevelt had suggested that for Anglo-American strategic planning the globe be divided three ways with the Americans responsible for the war in the Pacific, the British for that in the Middle East with joint responsibility for the war in Europe. Churchill agreed to the plan on 17 March. Under this arrangement, Australia was included in the Pacific War Zone, where the conduct of the

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war was to be the responsibility of the Americans. Interservice and interpersonal rivalries meant that this Pacific Zone was further subdivided into a South West Pacific command and a Pacific Ocean command. General Douglas MacArthur, who arrived in Australia from the Philippines on 17 March was made Supreme Commander of the South-West Pacific Area, while command of the Pacific Ocean area went to Admiral Nimitz. Thereafter Australia was to have no more influence in the conduct of the war under the Americans than it had when policy was determined by Britain.14

In the main, the defence of continental Australia was not an important feature in the American grand strategy. It figured not at all in that of Nimitz, who meant to advance against Japan through the central Pacific to the north of New Guinea. MacArthur was a little more concerned with the security of Australia, but largely so that it might provide the base from which he might launch his campaign against Japan, and in the short term as the source of readily available troops.

If Australia was never a vital part of the American strategy, the Northern Territory and Darwin was even less so. Once the Japanese advance against Port Moresby had been turned back, MacArthur planned his return to the Philippines through New Guinea and Borneo rather than the former Dutch-held islands to the northwest of Darwin.

**Army in the Territory**

During March 1942, Australia braced itself for invasion. The Philippines fell to the Japanese, and on 17 March, General D. MacArthur passed through Darwin to reorganize his headquarters in Melbourne. Throughout Australia, defences were stiffened. Nowhere was this more necessary than in the Northern Territory. After 21 February 1942, that area of the Territory north of Birdum was placed under military rule - though at no time was it under martial law. Until after the war, civilians required passes to enter this area. Thus, for a time after 1 March 1942, Alice Springs became the centre for the civil administration for the Northern Territory.

In February 1942, the Australian forces in and about Darwin under the command of Major-General D.V.J. Blake, consisted of two infantry brigades - the 3rd under Brigadier A.R. Allen and the 23rd under

14 Robertson, *Australia at War*, p.111.
Braced for Invasion

Brigadier E.F. Lind - in all about 14,000 men. However, the standard of the troops who were expected to hold Australia's northern frontier was not high. The only experienced troops were two AIF units - the 2/14th Field Regiment and the 2/4th Pioneer Battalion - and one militia battalion (the 19th) which had been in Darwin during most of 1941. The other five militia battalions - the 7th, 8th, 27th, 43rd and the 19th Machine Gun Battalion - had all been called up since the entry of Japan into the war: the 7th and 8th Battalions arrived in Darwin only during February.15

The purpose of these troops was to protect Darwin and the RAAF aerodromes in Darwin and at Batchelor: forward detachments were grouped at Shoal Bay, Lee Point and Bynoe Harbour.16 But unless the enemy attacked these locations, these troops would have been ineffectual. Had the enemy landed elsewhere and captured the north/south road, the defenders would have been isolated.

In March, the defences of northern Australia, together with that of Australia generally, were strengthened with the return of four AIF brigades from the Middle East. On 27 March, Major-General E.F. Herring assumed command of the Australian forces in the Territory. Indeed, at this time, the whole command structure was replaced. Brigadiers R. King and I. Dougherty took over the 3rd and 23rd Brigades, and AIF officers were placed in command of the 7th, 8th, 19th and 2/4 Pioneer Battalions. The headquarters of the 7th Military District were removed to Katherine, and the two brigades were redeployed along the main road south from Darwin, so that they might more readily respond to any enemy invasion. Morale and efficiency improved, particularly in May, when the 19th Brigade of the 6th Division, one of the A.I.F. units recently returned from the Middle East, was moved to the Top End. By the end of the year, there were major camps at Birdum, Larrimah, Mataranka, Pine Creek and at several locations between Adelaide River and Darwin.17

American troops were also used to strengthen the Territory's defences. The 147th and 148th U.S. Field Artillery Regiment had been

16 AWM, 54, 625/5/16.
17 AWM, 54, 625/4/1.
stationed at Darwin since 5 January, and by March, 1942, there were 5,000 American personnel in Darwin, with airmen stationed at several of the centres in the interior. During 1942, American troops were stationed at Birdum, Katherine, Pine Creek, Adelaide River and Darwin. The construction of a new runway and taxiway at the military airport was largely carried out by two American construction units, the 808 Engineers Battalion and the 43 Engineers Regiment.

RAAF

Though some aircraft had been dispersed to Batchelor and Daly Waters prior to 19 February, the attack on Darwin's military airfield had all but destroyed the RAAF strength in the North Western Area. The immediate task of the RAAF after the bombing was to re-group and to repair the airport and await new equipment. On 17 March, however, the arrival in Darwin of No 9 Squadron, the first of three from the No 49 American Fighter Group, helped provide the first adequate air cover for Darwin.

The Darwin aerodrome became the target for later raids, but none was as heavy as those on 19 February, nor the destruction as great. In the meantime work continued to provide increased and better facilities, and a greater number of dispersal areas.

RAAF bases and dispersal areas were established along the length of the main north/south road at Darwin, Daly Waters, Batchelor and Alice Springs, and there were numbers of strips on many of the more remote missions and stations. Other aerodromes and strips were carved out of the jungle at places such as the 27 mile, 34 mile, Hughes, Fenton, and Carson. In accordance with a signal dated 23 January, 1942 arrangements had been made for the development of ten main aerodromes in the region north of Birdum. Each of the main aerodromes was to have

18 Horner, *Crisis of Command*, p.69.
20 AWM, 54, 625/4/1.
21 AWM, 54, 625/7/2.
23 AWM, 54, 81/4/152.
24 AWM, 54, 625/7/2.
at least two satellite aerodromes, for the dispersal of aircraft in an emergency, located between five and ten miles from the main aerodromes. Work on extending and improving these facilities was carried on at a furious pace during the third quarter of 1942.

By 3 July, 1942 there were 65 airfields and strips established or under construction in the Top End north of Daly Waters. The RAAF's No 2 Squadron of Hudson bombers was at Darwin: other units to the south included the 8th (US) Fighter Squadron at the 27 Mile, No 13 Squadron and No 34 Transport Squadron at Hughes, 30 miles south of Darwin, the 9th (US) Squadron at the 34 Mile, the 7th (US) Fighter Squadron and the 71st Bomber Squadron at Batchelor, No 12 Squadron at the 65 Mile, and the 64th (US) Bomber Squadron at Fenton.

The Army could do little but prepare for an invasion that might come, but the RAAF was able to take the war to the enemy. While the American fighter squadrons intercepted the Japanese raiders over northern Australian targets, Nos 2 and 13 Squadrons with their Hudsons continued to reconnoitre enemy bases and also launched numbers of attacks against bases in Timor and Ambon. They also made numbers of sorties to resupply men of the 2/2nd Independent Company fighting their guerilla war in Timor. Later, in May the RAAF efforts were supported by those of USAAF Flying Fortresses staging through Darwin from Townsville to bomb targets in Koepang and Penfui.

As the threat of invasion receded so the early warning facilities improved. In February, 1942 a radar unit was established at Darwin, but was not yet operational. In March, when it became effective it provided early warning of approaching Japanese raiders thereby enabling Darwin's fighter cover more time to mount an effective defence. By mid-1942 the steady build-up of aircraft and equipment also permitted more and better planned offensive operations to be mounted against the Japanese.

25 AAC, A705/1, 175/6/3.
26 AAC, A705/1, 175/6/3.
27 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force, pp.556-60.
Defending the Northern Gateway

Special Units

One of the more remarkable units formed during the war was the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, formed almost exclusively of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Military authorities had been particularly fearful that Aborigines might be sympathetic to the Japanese; they were also concerned about their lack of knowledge and the vulnerability of Arnhem Land. The Aborigines there had been particularly successful in dissuading outsiders from intruding. A number of intruders there in the early 'thirties were killed, including Japanese pearlers.

Following these incidents, the Melbourne anthropologist, Donald Thomson, was persuaded to live and work with the Aborigines of Arnhem Land for a period of two years in 1935-6.

In June, 1941, Thomson, then a Flight Lieutenant in the RAAF, was asked to lecture to military authorities about Arnhem Land and the Aborigines there. One of his listeners, Colonel Scott, the director of Special Operations, conceived the idea of using the Aborigines of the area to provide an early warning of any Japanese landings in the area.

In September, 1941, Thomson was charged with the task of raising this special observer unit which would also be responsible for the protection of the east flank of Darwin. Forty-nine Aborigines were recruited to this unit. While primarily concerned with surveillance, this unit was also to become the nucleus for a much larger force of Aborigines should the need arise. Thomson insisted that only traditional weapons should be used, and in order to maintain his authority he lived in the same manner as his soldiers.

For sixteen months the unit trained in guerilla warfare and ranged throughout Arnhem Land. It was disbanded only when the threat of a Japanese landing had become a remote one, and when the task of coastal surveillance was taken over by another unit. Although never called upon to use the skills that they had honed in battle, Thomson and his unit succeeded in destroying any Japanese sympathies amongst the Aborigines, and in gathering detailed information about the region.

Another special force was North Australia Observer Unit, raised by another anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner. Stanner had a detailed knowledge of northern Australia, having worked there as an anthropologist in 1932 and again in 1934-5. After studies overseas including an expedition to Kenya, he had returned to Australia and worked as a research assistant to Percy Spender, Minister for the Army until October, 1941, when he became a personal assistant to the new Labor Minister for the Army, Frank Forde. In this capacity he had been commissioned to report upon the defences of Eastern Command.

In early 1942 a joint conference of service personnel called for the establishment of an Observer Organisation for northern Australia. Stanner put forward a suggestion based upon his understanding of the Boer commandos during the Boer War and of the successful East African campaigns of the German commander, Lieut-Col. P. von Lettow-Vorbeck, during World War I, and of Australia's own Lighthorse tradition. In the event his suggestion for a mobile unit was accepted and he was given the task of raising and organising the unit within a matter of weeks.

Approval was granted for the establishment of such a unit in May 1942. Its task was to patrol northern Australia from Normanton in Queensland to Yampi Sound in Western Australia and to report any enemy activities.

Recruits hastened to volunteer for service in the new unit, many of whom were bushmen and members of Lighthorse units prior to 1939. The attraction for these men was that the unit was to be mounted.

After basic training at Ingleburn in New South Wales, the first of the 500-strong unit embarked for Northern Australia in July 1942. Headquarters were established at Katherine, and it was from here, on 29 August, 1942, that members of 'A' and 'B' Companies left to take up

31 Walker and Walker, Curtin's Cowboys, p.3.
32 Ibid., p.6.
positions in their assigned areas. 'A' Company, with headquarters at Roper Bar on the Roper River was deployed to patrol the region of the Roper River and the Limmen Bight region of the Gulf of Carpentaria. 'B' Company's region was that about the Victoria and Ord Rivers and the Kimberley region of Western Australia; headquarters were established near Ivanhoe Station. The patrol area of 'C' Company was the Gulf Country of north-western Queensland from Normanton to Borroloola, with headquarters near Gregory Downs Station; it was in position in September. 'D' Company remained at headquarters; it comprised reinforcements that were expected to make good the losses expected from contact with the enemy.33 Besides these mobile land patrols there was also a number of fixed coastwatching posts in the region about Darwin, and there were several small seagoing vessels charged with patrolling off shore and victualling some of the remote outposts.

The idea was that platoons and sections would constantly patrol allotted areas, watching and reporting. The latter was to be done by an elaborate wireless network feeding information into the Katherine headquarters from the most remote areas. In the event of enemy landings the units were to shadow the enemy, and where the opportunity occurred to engage in guerilla attacks to harass the enemy's movements.

Unfortunately for many who had volunteered for the North Australia Observer Unit (NAOU) in search of action, they were called upon to do little more than patrol work.

From July 1943, when the threat of invasion was increasingly unlikely, the unit was reorganised. By October, 1943, the outlying observation posts were closed down and the patrols ceased and activities were confined to the twelve coastwatching stations about Darwin and three near Wyndham. Headquarters were removed from Katherine to the Manton Dam. On 23 October, Stanner was posted to the Research Directorate in Melbourne.34

It is difficult to assess the value of the unit because it was never called to show its full potential. Stanner, the academic, had little rapport with his men, but in his Second in Command, Captain Max White, he had a bushman of immense common sense with whom all of the men could relate. White assumed command after Stanner. It was his

33 Ibid., pp.28-9.
34 Ibid., p.177.
responsibility to close the headquarters in January, 1945 and to take the remainder of the unit to Sydney where it was disbanded.

The Railways

If the special units were not called upon to live up to their full potential, the North and Central Australian Railways certainly were. The railhead at Alice Springs became the centre of activity in the town with the resources of the Central Australian Railway being stretched to the limit. During the height of the emergency in 1942 and 1943 there were as many as 56 through trains operating each week in addition to the necessary service trains; prior to the war two through trains each week complemented by special livestock and supply trains, when required, were sufficient to meet demand. At the same time, the staff required to operate the service more than doubled from 451 in 1938/9 to 940 in 1943/4.

Although all the Australian railways were hard-pressed at this time, the Commonwealth Railways obtained eleven locomotives from the Queensland railways to supplement those hired or purchased from the South Australian Railways for use on the central line. At the same time new running sheds had to be constructed at Marree, Amringa, Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, the track was upgraded and additional passing loops were installed to help expedite the greatly increased traffic. On 17 April 1942 at the height of the invasion scare, £1,467,880 was approved for essential works on the railway.35

After the closing of the sea routes to Darwin, all supplies to the troops in the Top End, and the troops themselves, had to pass through Alice Springs. So too did many of the locomotives and rolling stock that were required for the North Australia Railway and had to be taken overland.

The Northern Australia Railway (NAR) was virtually transformed during the war-years. Indeed, the scope of its work began to increase considerably during 1940 and 1941. Tonnages carried increased from 1851 tonnes in 1939 to a record 217,721 tonnes in 1944. During the same period travel increased from 57,085 kilometres in 1939 to 423,584 in 1942 and 1,193,372 in 1944. In order to help cope with this increased demand four locomotives were acquired from the western Australian Railways in 1940, and another four from South Australia.

35 AWM, 54, 815/6/2.
during the following year, while numbers of railwaymen had to be recruited from the south.36

The railways played an important role in helping to move the last of the evacuees to safety after the first raids on Darwin on 19 February.

Major works had to be undertaken on the North Australian Railway to permit it to cope with the greatly increased traffic. In the five months to August 1942 engineers inspected all bridges and strengthened those requiring it, built numbers of new loops and sidings, and sunk three bores to increase the water supply.37

At the same time a major effort was made to relocate the headquarters and workshops of the NAR to Katherine, where they were considered to be a little less vulnerable to air-attack.

In April, 1942 the 273 staff of the NAR was responsible for three shunt locomotives, eleven main-line locomotives, four passenger carriages and a motley collection of freight vehicles. Four trains each day were pressed into service to cope with the traffic, each with a turn-around time of 48 hours. The time taken for troops to travel from Adelaide to Darwin was eight days.38

Darwin

All centres in the Northern Territory were affected by the war - perhaps none more so than Darwin. Soon after the bombing, Darwin was 'almost deserted and peaceful in its very quietness'.39 The army and airforce had moved to defence lines to the south, leaving the town in the hands of the navy. The whole of Darwin society had been transposed elsewhere. Chinese had been pressed into the Allied Works Council or evacuated; the Aborigines and half-castes had been evacuated. Not until later in 1942, when the immediate threat of invasion had been removed,

37 AWM, 54, 625/7/2.
38 AWM, 54, 422/7/8.
39 VX115, 'War Came to Australia', in Soldiering On, (Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1942), p.163.
did army and airforce units move back into the town. At this time, Darwin was little more than an entertainment centre.

Central Australia

Alice Springs too underwent immense change during the war years. It was the centre of the Territory's civil administration and the railhead through which troops and supplies moved to centres further north. In the first years of the war, the European population of Alice Springs had been 764 persons. This was augmented by members of the civil administration from Darwin, employees of the Allied Works Council and at one time during the war, up to 5,000 troops. It is little wonder that there should have been disturbances in the town.

The first few months of 1942 were ones of great concern which shook the resolve of all Australians concerned with the conduct of the war. The success of the Japanese had quickly dispelled the illusion of the Singapore Strategy in which so many defence experts had taken heart for so long, and it highlighted the extent to which Britain in particular had failed to appreciate the significance of advances in air power and strategy in the inter-war period. The Japanese success also highlighted the inadequacy of initiatives determined by this policy. Darwin had perhaps been adequately defended against a seaborne attack, but it was virtually defenceless against a serious air attack.

The evident bankruptcy of Australia's defence policy and of many of the defence measures flowing from it, was a matter of great concern to many Australians, particularly those expected to bear the brunt of any Japanese attack.

For all that though, the long-standing assessment that Darwin would most likely be subject to raids rather than an invasion in the event of a major conflict, proved to be correct.

41 AAD, F1, 42/432.
CHAPTER 9
LATTER STAGES OF THE WAR, 1943-45

The fear of invasion through the Northern Territory receded during the latter half of 1942, particularly after the American naval victories in the Coral Sea and at Midway early in June 1942, and the allied victory over the Japanese land forces in New Guinea in September. Darwin in the Northern Territory again became a base from which to attack the Japanese to the north west, and a staging point for troops and supplies going to or from battle zones. However, while certainly a useful base, Darwin was never a vital one in the latter years of the war because American strategy was built upon an advance against Japan through New Guinea and the Philippines, and the islands of the Central Pacific to the north. The importance of Darwin decreased even further as the front line moved north with succeeding allied victories.

For many of those stationed in the Territory the time spent there after 1942 was one of frustration and tedium. The conduct of the war in the South West Pacific Area remained totally in the hands of MacArthur, and as greater numbers of American troops became available he preferred to use them rather than the Australians. In August 1943 MacArthur had six American army divisions at his disposal: By September, 1944, he controlled eighteen. Early in 1943 MacArthur reorganised his forces which meant that American units became directly responsible to him rather than to General Blamey, still designated, commander of Allied Land Forces.1 All the while, the RAAF remained bedevilled by command problems,2 and as increasing numbers of American pilots and aircraft came under MacArthur's command there were few significant roles for the Australians.

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The Air War

Regardless of the command problems, however, the war in the Northern Territory was essentially an air war and much of it was fought off-shore. Only the fighters battled over Australia.

The fighters stationed at the Darwin RAAF base provided increasingly effective air cover against the Japanese raiders. In October, 1942, this role was taken over by the RAAF when two squadrons, Nos 76 and 77, flying American P-40s, replaced the Americans. Three months later these were in turn replaced by three squadrons of Spitfires - No 54 flown by members of the RAF and Nos 452 and 457 flown by Australians trained in Britain, and all provided by Churchill at the request of Foreign Affairs Minister Evatt. These squadrons were stationed at Darwin and the Strauss and Livingston strips to the south.

The first Spitfires were used against a raid by fifteen Japanese fighters on 2 March, 1943; they scored three kills without loss themselves. Despite this early success it took some time for the Spitfire pilots to learn the most effective way of using their machines, and on 2 May thirteen were lost and only six enemy aircraft accounted for. However as they became more proficient, Japanese air raids suffered increasing losses. The last heavy raid on the Territory airfields was on 6 July 1943; they ceased completely by the end of November.

In June 1944 two more Spitfire squadrons, Nos 548 and 549, piloted by members of the RAF, were posted to the Northern Territory. They had little to do. The fighter crews then suffered the frustrations that bedevilled the AIF units in the north, though ultimately there was relief for the Australians of 452 Squadron when they moved to Morotai in December, 1944, followed by No 457 in February, 1945 to take part in the offensive in the islands to the north of Australia.5

While the work for the fighter pilots tapered off, it continued for those in the bomber squadrons. The Hudsons of Nos 2 and 13 Squadrons continued to carry the offensive against Japanese targets in the occupied areas to the north-west, though in October, 1942 they were reinforced by

3 AWM, 54, 417/1/8.
4 Long, The Six Years War, p.304.
No 31 Squadron equipped with Beaufighters. In January, 1943, this offensive force was further reinforced when a squadron of American B24 Liberator bombers of 319th Squadron of the Fifth Air Force, and a Squadron of B25 Mitchell medium bombers flown by No 18 Dutch Squadron flew into Fenton and Batchelor. No 319 Squadron was replaced by the 380th Bombardment Group in July, 1943, but the Dutch continued to operate from the Northern Territory until February, 1945 when they moved forward for action against Balikpapan on Borneo.

The American and Dutch bombers with their longer range and better payloads took over the bulk of the offensive operations. No 13 Squadron was withdrawn to Canberra in April, 1943, though No 2 remained in the north, where, late in 1943 it was re-equipped with Beauforts and Mitchells. In May 1944, No 2 Squadron changed once more, this time to B25s. They continued to operate from Hughes base until May 1945 when they joined the allied offensive against Borneo. No 12 Squadron was re-equipped with Vultee Vengeance dive bombers in October, 1942 but flew only one combat mission. In mid 1943 the squadron was relocated to Queensland, though returned to the Territory in May 1945, when offensive operations had practically ceased.

During 1944 new facilities were constructed at the military airfield at Darwin. The main runway and taxiways were lengthened and upgraded in anticipation of it becoming the base for the 4th United States Air Depot. It took on increasing significance with the arrival of the 380th United States Bombardment Group with its new B29 bombers in July and August.

In June, 1944, the Australian officer commanding the base was up-graded from Squadron-Leader to Wing Commander 'by reason of the fact that the Darwin Airfield is now largely used by USAAF... and to ensure that RAAF operational facilities are not unduly subordinated or diminished'. Two months later, on 1 August, what had previously been known as No 52 Operational Base Unit was renamed RAAF Station, Darwin, in recognition of its enhanced role and status.

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7 Powell, *Shadow's Edge*, p.156.
9 AAC, A707/1, 231/9/400, Pt. 1B.
Early in 1945 the 380 Bombardment Group went forward to bases in the Philippines. Other units followed. When peace was declared there were no medium or heavy bombers remaining in the Territory.

Land Operations

The role for the Army in the Northern Territory had only ever been a defensive one. The Japanese continued to have large numbers of troops in the islands to the north west throughout 1943 and 1944, yet as the likelihood of invasion receded with allied victories in New Guinea, the Northern Territory Force was left without an apparent purpose.

In the months immediately following the bombing of Darwin Herring had changed the emphasis of the Army's role from that of the defence of Fortress Darwin, to one of facilitating the rapid deployment of units to counter landings at more remote locations. The reorganisation and exercises associated with this served to maintain enthusiasm for a time, but the continued lack of action, and frustration amongst the A.I.F. units from the latter part of 1942, meant that declining morale provided particular problems for those in command.

Despite the decreasing likelihood of invasion, the high command seemed reluctant to redeploy the units defending northern Australia. Herring left on 11 August, 1942 to command the New Guinea Force, so it was left to his successors, Major-General J.E.S. Stevens (August 1942-March 1943) and Major-General A.S. Allen (March 1943-October 1944) to contend with these problems. The Northern Territory Force remained at three brigade strength until July, 1944, when it was decided that one infantry brigade - the 12th - would be adequate. In the succeeding months to January, 1945, as units moved out, Northern Territory Force troop numbers declined to about 4,200, similar in size to that in 1941.\(^\text{10}\)

However, if the main body of the Northern Territory Force played little role in the northern war, those units involved in hazardous intelligence-gathering did so. Even before the Allied Intelligence Bureau was formed in July, 1942 secret operations to Timor and other occupied islands to the north-west began from Darwin. Later in 1942 these operations were directed from a secret Services Reconnaissance Department base established at the old quarantine station on the East Arm of Darwin harbour. These clandestine activities continued throughout the

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\(^{10}\) Powell, *Shadow's Edge*, pp.129-31.
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Yet while little apparent success was forthcoming from intelligence gathering forays into enemy occupied territory beyond Australia's north coast, it is evident that signals intelligence operations in northern Australia were particularly effective, although the extent of this, too, is impossible to quantify.\(^1\)

With the outbreak of war in the Pacific a number of signal monitoring units were established in the Top End in addition to *Coonawarra*. An intercept station was established at the RAAF base at Darwin in August 1941, with another manned by the 51st Australian Special Wireless Section at Batchelor. As their operations came under threat in Java in 1942, the Netherlands East Indies Intelligence Services established a station near Darwin. The Americans also established two ratio stations in the Top End. The Navy established a station at the Adelaide River: it became operational on 23 March 1943 and remained so until 21 September 1945. On a cattle station near Darwin the 138 Radio Intelligence Company of the U.S. Army Signal Corps set up a mobile unit in June 1943. Then, towards the end of the war, in April 1945, the Royal Canadian Signal Corps' Special Wireless Unit set up a station at Darwin to intercept and analyse Japanese messages in morse.\(^2\)

All stations contributed to the pooling of intelligence, and established the basis for co-operation that persisted after the war.

Naval Operations

Darwin harbour was quickly rehabilitated after the bombing of 19 February, and operations across the wharf became much more efficient as the civilian wharf labourers were evacuated south and army work gangs were organised. Darwin harbour never became an important forward base. Naval operations in the South West Pacific Area were the responsibility of the Americans, who were never convinced of Darwin's utility. Moreover, it was expected that the move against Japan would be through

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13 List provided by Professor D. Ball, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.
New Guinea and the islands to the north rather than through the East Indies. However, Part Darwin did fulfill a useful role as a staging port for American submarines based at Fremantle and required to patrol in the waters of the East Indies.

Darwin also became home base for the 24th Minesweeping Flotilla from early 1942. The ships of the 24th Flotilla, mainly corvettes, were primarily concerned with anti-submarine work and escort duty, but they also fulfilled an important role in supplying allied troops in Timor, until the last of these troops, 2/4th Independent Company which had relieved the 2/2nd Independent Company only four months before, were withdrawn in January, 1943.

The War and Black Territorians

The war severely dislocated the lives of white Territorians: but the effect on black Territorians was immeasurably greater. For the first time, Europeans in the Territory far outnumbered the Aborigines. For a time, the relationships were determined by the needs of the war effort, and in accordance with military protocol, rather than those traditions which had prevailed hitherto, and which resembled those between conquered and conquering peoples. While the army was little concerned about black/white relations, it also showed little concern for cultural differences among the Aborigines. Thus, as Catherine Berndt observed while undertaking anthropological research at the time, the Aboriginal population of the several control camps which were established, were mixed 'not only in regard to place of origin and cultural background' but also in that they also represented 'the whole gamut of contact experience, from old Darwin hands, and jaded cattle station sophisticates to people associating with Europeans for the first time'. Once in these camps, the Aboriginal labourers and their dependants were subjected to the rigours of army discipline in relation to work routine, messing arrangements, and standards of hygiene, and all were introduced to the vagaries of a cash economy. The cultural dislocation was all but total, and it undoubtedly had profound and long-term effects on individual Aborigines and tribal groups.

The overriding demands of the war effort handicapped E.W.P. Chinnery, the Director of Native Affairs, in his efforts to establish the

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Territory Branch of his department, and to implement policies and initiatives flowing from the 'New Deal' for Aborigines. Throughout the war - and for many years after - the major concern of the administration was simply to slow or curtail the 'drift' of Aborigines from reserves to the towns. This 'drift' existed before the war, but it became more pronounced with the build-up of troop numbers and the multiplication of contact points. The incidence of venereal disease in the Aboriginal women became a major fear of military officers, and V. White, the Secretary of the Native Affairs Branch, wrote seriously of the need to protect the European troops and workers from the Aborigines.

Throughout the period of the war, the officers of the Native Affairs Branch who were concerned to safeguard the interests of the Aborigines could do little more than respond to crises. Immediately prior to the bombing of northern Australia, the Branch had been called upon to supervise the evacuation of full and part Aborigines from the war zone: headquarters were transferred to Mataranka, to supervise those who had been evacuated from Darwin to Pine Creek, Katherine and Mataranka. Subsequently they were called upon to supervise the many control camps which were established in the vicinity of army establishments - though not so close that the Aborigines had easy access to them. These camps were to help,

1) To combat contact with troops and Road Construction workers.
2) To provide work for natives who were deprived of employment by the evacuation of the civil population and for those who had migrated to centres of settlements in search of tobacco etc; [and]
3) To assist the Army in the health sphere, in relation to malaria and VD control.

There had been only two supervised camps prior to the war; at Darwin, and at Jay Creek under T. Strehlow. After the bombing, another camp was established at Mataranka, and soon after, others were established

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15 Elkin Papers, 31 August 1943, 73J.
16 AAD, F1, 42/415.
17 AAD, F1, 42/41.
18 AAC, A659, 42/1/1347.
19 AAD, F1, 46/363.
Latter Stages of the War

At Katherine, Adelaide River and at Koolpinyah. Later in the year, a camp was established at Maranboy, and others followed at Cullen Creek and Larrimah. Smaller camps were opened at Elliott, Banka Banka, Barrow Creek and Dunmara. Delissaville continued until April 1943. In August 1942, all natives at Alice Springs were removed to the reserve at the Bungalow. This had previously been used for part-Aborigines who had been evacuated to Balaklava in South Australia.

At first, the Aborigines had been seen as a hindrance to the war effort - even a potential fifth column - though later they became a valuable labour force which enabled troops to be freed for other purposes. A small number of Aborigines had been used to perform menial tasks about the Darwin garrison as early as 1933. The call for their employment about military installations increased with the build-up in troop numbers, though these requests were constantly opposed by the Native Affairs Branch - until after the evacuation of Darwin. For the most part, the Aborigines were given unskilled tasks, which included clearing bush, loading vehicles or carting wood, but many were also given training in semi-skilled mechanical tasks in the army workshops. In a more direct manner, others were employed in intelligence work for the army.

The employment and accommodation conditions offered to the Aborigines by the army were vastly superior to those which had been offered by the traditional employers of Aboriginal labour. That the Aborigines should have readily adapted to these conditions, and worked satisfactorily, gave the lie to the arguments used by the pastoralists in seeking to justify the poor conditions for Aboriginal workers which generally prevailed on the pastoral stations.

20 Elkin Papers, 21 March 1947, 56.
21 AAC, A659, 44/1/168.
23 AAC, A659, 41/1/5385.
Unfortunately for the Aborigines, and those who were concerned to ameliorate their working conditions, any opportunities provided during the war years disappeared as quickly as they had arisen. The army made no provision to ease the problems associated with its withdrawal - resulting in the sudden unemployment of the Aborigines, and the closing of the control camps. This was left to the officers of the understaffed Native Affairs Branch. Except as an example of what might be achieved in accommodating the two cultures, the war-time experience counted for little. Indeed, in so far as it raised the expectations of many Aborigines, and yet dislocated the normal Territory economy, the war years set back efforts to come to terms with the differences between blacks and whites in the Territory.

The war years were turbulent ones for all Territorians and for a time served to focus the attention of all Australians on the region. In the cause of defence of the Territory vast amounts of capital were invested in major public works in the Territory that might have taken decades to acquire otherwise. These certainly helped in the post-war reconstruction and provided a basis for later development. However, once the emergency passed so too did much of the resolve to promote economic development there and to strengthen northern defences. New initiatives in this regard had to wait until defence theorists determined a new policy appropriate to the new strategic situation after the war.
For a time after 15 August, 1945 Darwin again became a town of considerable importance, this time, as the clearing house for prisoners-of-war and others returning to Australia. But it had begun to assume this role even before peace had been declared.

By mid-1944 it was evident that the war in the north was drawing to a close and reductions had already been made in the numbers of troops stationed there. These were prompted by the government's wish to ease the transition to peace-time activities and by the increasing demands for extra manpower in the reserved occupations, particularly after the Royal Navy became involved in the South West Pacific Area.

Reductions accelerated during 1945. On 9 January the War Cabinet approved the recommendations of the Defence Committee that the coast and anti-aircraft defences at Darwin should be scaled down, along with those at Sydney and Fremantle. Rapid troop reductions were also made at Alice Springs. While at the height of the war, there were as many as 8,000 military personnel stationed in the town, the number had been reduced to 3,666 all ranks by 20 November, 1944, and was run down further during the following year.

By the end of 1945, troop reductions in the Top End were almost complete. A memo of 29 December, 1945 warned officers of the need for haste in repatriating personnel south.

It has been decided that the Stuart Highway will close as an L of C on 21 JAN '46. For this reason it is necessary to accelerate as much as possible the reduction of NT FORCE to the ultimate strength required to meet its post-war commitment.

It is therefore desired that the posted strengths to which it was planned to reduce units by 30 JUN '46, should be attained by 22 FEB '46.

It is not anticipated that rail transport will be available for movement of troops south after 17 JAN '46 and arrangements have been made for three trains, each of 300 capacity, to be allotted for the conveyance of troops from this Area.3

So ended the most turbulent period in the Territory's history. Yet it proved a hiccup in this history rather than a turning point. Despite the lessons to be learned about Australia's defence, and the role of the Northern Territory in it, succeeding governments seemed reluctant to take them to heart. Certainly, the resolve to upgrade the position of Darwin in Australia's defence initiatives quickly dissipated once hostilities had ceased.

In hindsight it is evident that the assessment that Darwin would have to withstand no more than occasional raids proved to be correct. It is also evident, however, that there was a large element of luck in this. The larger defence policy of which this formed part, was totally discredited, so too was the suggestion that the only raids to which Darwin might be subjected were those from cruiser-based planes.

In the short term, however, authorities and civilians were more concerned with returning to peace-time pursuits than learning the lessons from the war.

Post War

Arrangements for the supervision of the return of civilians to Darwin and the devolution of power to the civil authorities had been made early in 1945, when, on 14 February, a sub-committee was formed at a meeting in Melbourne for this very purpose.4 Arrangements proceeded smoothly after the declaration of peace in the Pacific. Civil administration was re-established first in the region south of Pine Creek, and later extended northwards to Darwin on 28 February, 1946, with the repeal of the National Security (Emergency Control) Regulations, and the lifting of the last restrictions on civilian entry to Darwin. Administrator

3 AWM, 54, 703/5/53.
4 AAD, F1, 44/486, pt. 2.
Abbott reoccupied Government House at Darwin in July, 1945, and from there supervised the return of the several government departments which had been evacuated to southern centres.

Yet while the civilians were eager to return to Darwin, bureaucratic delays compounded their problems of returning to peace-time activities. Even before the war the government had been eager to have Darwin replanned on the model of Canberra. Thus, on 16 August, 1945, the day after the end of the Pacific War, the Royal Assent was given to the Darwin Lands Acquisition Act. In accordance with this act, all freehold land within an area of 144 square kilometres about Darwin - 443 blocks - was acquired by the government from 17 January, 1946. However, continued delays in implementing the new act encouraged the renaissance of the low form of accommodation that had characterised Darwin prior to the war. Reconstruction was also hampered by shortages in essential building materials. It was several years before civilian life in Darwin returned to anything approaching normality.

In a similar fashion the good intentions to refashion Australia's defence policy in the light of lessons recently learned were squandered. In 1944 Prime Minister Curtin was a firm advocate of a defensive screen in the islands to the north of Australia, with the deployment of garrisons and facilities including docks, aerodromes and fixed defences. In part, this policy detailed by the Defence Committee proposed a major base at Darwin and an advanced base in Timor.

Late in 1945 a Northern Australia Development Committee was appointed by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction to advise on matters that might advance Northern Australia. A report from the Committee dated 27 November, 1947, highlighted the extent to which war-weariness and other peace-time concerns had quickly distracted attention from defence issues and lessons that might be learned from the recently concluded war, particularly as they concerned Northern Australia.

At the time of the establishment of the Committee the view held was that the development of Northern Australia was vital to the defence of Australia as a whole. This was categorically expressed both by the late John Curtin and Sir Thomas Blamey, CIC AMF in

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5 AAD, F1, 46/159.
October and December 1944 respectively. However, in the light of your [Secretary of the Defence Committee] comments in a memorandum dated 17th January, 1947 on the report of the Committee on the 'Development of Northern Australia' it would appear that the earlier view has radically changed and that the development of Northern Australia no longer has any special importance to the defence of the Commonwealth. From the viewpoint of defence Northern Australia is purely a section of the Commonwealth and consequently factors other than those of defence are of greater significance as to how and what degree Northern Australia is developed.7

The situation in the Northern Territory virtually reverted to that pertaining in the early 'thirties.

The three services certainly maintained a higher presence in Darwin after the war than they did before, manning the new facilities that had been provided before and during the conflict. However, for many years this remained a token force.

The one major exception to this scenario was in relation to HMAS Coonawarra. It was an important naval communication station, and it continued to be used in this role after the war. However, it also continued in its important intelligence gathering role, and became the more important as the other wartime units were decommissioned. In 1947 the co-operative intelligence arrangements established during the war were canonised in the UKUSA Agreement: Coonawarra was an important part of the network established by this agreement.

A Defence Policy in New Clothes

The question of Australian defence was certainly not ignored in the years immediately following the war, but there seems little evidence that the policy espoused in succeeding years was based upon considerations of the strategic lessons from the last war or of the new situation in the region promoted by it.

7 AAC, A431/1, 47/2366.
A Five Year Programme was inaugurated on 1 July, 1947 making provision for a defence expenditure of £250,000,000. For the most part, however, this was simply a re-armament programme concerned with the up-dating of equipment, and with little consideration as to whether or not it was the most appropriate for Australia's needs in the new circumstances. The Navy acquired some new vessels, and on 16 December, 1948, commissioned the aircraft carrier *Sydney*, but without any real appreciation of how this might complete Australia's defence force. In the same fashion the Air Force acquired new jet-propelled aircraft with little consideration of the role that they might be called upon to play. The Programme reflected something of the technological revolution that occurred during the war and insisted that the government give the Long Range Weapons Project 'the highest priority'. However, it reflected little of the altered balance of power in the region. For Darwin, the programme simply proposed the maintenance of the anti-submarine defences.

In the immediate post-war years, no consideration was given to the most appropriate strength, organisation and deployment of the armed forces. It was assumed, by default, that the arms of the services should simply reflect those raised during the war, and which were really only appropriate when Australians were called upon to fight beyond Australia, with and under the command of far more powerful allies who might be expected to provide much of the equipment and logistical support. In the short term, the outbreak of the Korean War in mid-1950, and the commitment of Australian personnel to the United Nations forces, only served to reinforce this notion. Afterwards successive conservative governments paid scant attention to defence planning and needs: the National Service scheme was wound down, and finally abolished in 1957.

For several years after the war Australia's defence policy was essentially no different from what had pertained before, though it was no longer a firm premis: Australia was in no better position to defend herself from a major military power and her security remained dependent upon the aid that might be provided by a powerful friend. However, it was evident that Australia's defence could no longer be based upon Britain's dominance of the seas. In the short term, it seemed that the role of Britain would simply be filled by the United States.

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8 AAC, A816/1, 14/301/326.
However, just as there was no guarantee prior to the war that Britain would be able to divert forces for the defence of Australia in the event of Australia being threatened, despite strong cultural and kinship ties, so, afterwards, there was even less guarantee that the United States would deem it to be in its own interests to come to the defence of Australia should the latter be attacked.

Thus in the period after the war Australian governments did what they could to make Australia important to the Americans, and to have the Americans commit forces to the Asian region. To this end the government became a party to the ANZUS pact which was signed on 1 September, 1951, followed three years later, on 8 September, 1954 by the SEATO Treaty. So-called defence policy was one of forward defence, where Australia hoped to meet any threat to her security in regions beyond Australia, preferably in consort with powerful allies.

So long as forward defence remained Australia's orthodox defence policy, Darwin and the Northern Territory had little role to play, except for that dependent upon the operation of *HMAS Coonawarra*, and no major defence initiatives were taken in the region. It is only since the emphasis has shifted to the need for a more self-reliant defence posture that consideration has been given to the development of new defence installations in the Northern Territory and the role that the Territory should play in the defence of Australia.
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Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory, is closer to the major population centres of south-east Asia than those of Australia, and for a long time was the only town of any size in Australia’s sparsely populated north. The apparent vulnerability of the far north of Australia became a matter of increasing concern to many Australians because of the shifting balance of military power in the region during the early twentieth century; more particularly, the scaling down of the Royal Navy presence and the emergence of Japan as a modern military power. However, little was done to address this concern because those responsible for formulating and implementing Australian defence policy remained convinced of the efficacy of the policy which had persisted virtually unchanged since the mid-nineteenth century. This meant that the sense of alarm in Australia was all the greater when the weakness of this policy became apparent soon after the entry of the Japanese into the war.

This monograph seeks to provide a historical overview of the development of Australia’s defence policy and the role in it ascribed to Darwin and the Northern Territory up to and including World War II. It also includes a brief history of development in the Northern Territory, because throughout the period the notion of development and defence were closely allied.