NRAO ONLINE 11

Threat to Australia from the Air 1941-1942: Michael Moran, 1980

In 1939 and 1940, a major question facing the Australian Military was the nature and reality of the growing threat from Japan. Although Australian troops were on their way to North Africa, a major question facing policy makers in Canberra and Melbourne was the uncertainty of a possible attack by the Japanese. Given the reality of the German attacks against Britain as the Battle of Britain raged from 10 July to 31 October 1940 (followed by the night time Blitz from 7 September 1940 to 21 May 1941), the Australians could not depend on their UK counterparts for considered advice. Numerous authors have examined this topic. For example, Schedvin (1987, p. 248):

> Uncertainty existed initially about the type of equipment required by the Services. In the absence of a clear military threat to Australia, strategic planning was distinctly lethargic. Two underlying assumptions influenced the subsequent course of events. First, the view existed (although it was rarely stated explicitly) that the country was not able to defend itself adequately against a determined enemy because of vast distances and sparse population. Second, any attack would come from the sea. A carrier-borne air attack was possible, although considered unlikely to be sustained; an enemy carrier was also thought to be vulnerable to counter-attack. For these reasons, in 1940 and 1941 the priority was to defend the main ports and population centres against conventional naval attack.

A comprehensive source for discussions of the perceived threat in Australia as WWII began is the Honours Thesis from ANU of Michael Moran, **Radar Defence and the Darwin Disaster (1980).** Moran summarised the strategic thinking which occurred within the Australian Military in the years 1939-1941. Based on his research it has been possible to provide partial answers to a number of questions: (1) What was the threat faced by Australia as the war in Europe developed and the increased belligerence of Japan became evident preceding the attack on Hawaii in December 1941, (2) What types of defensive RDF were required, (3) What equipments should be constructed in Australia and which should be imported from the UK or the US, (4) Should new RDF sets be copied from UK and US designs, (5) Should the scientists attempt to influence strategic issues or leave these to the Military, (6) Would the nature of the possible conflicts in the jungles of the Pacific Theatre influence the nature of RDF use in Australia and (7) By whom and how would these fundamental questions be answered?

Martyn's activities in the UK in 1939, as he ordered four types of equipment (ShD, ASV, GL and MB)[1], were based on the advice of senior officers of the Royal Air Force.

> [The] proposed use did not, however, signify an intention to develop early warning equipment in Australia. Of the chain stations [CH], [Stanley] Bruce [High Commissioner of Australia in London] had observed in June [1939] that **"while obviously invaluable for the defence of Great Britain, there is no reason to believe that protective measures on this scale are necessary for Australia." What was necessary for Australia proved to rest on an order of priority arrived at before the Australian Services were brought into the picture.** (Moran, p. 6). (our emphasis)

By 1941 RAAF had emphasised the ASV programme to the exclusion of early warning and the Army was bent on ShD, the detection of ships and not aircraft. "The Service Chiefs supported this programme as such, although the RAAF director of radar Wing Commander A.G. Pither, later observed of this period that the Chiefs were 'blinded by science'. The laboratory [CSIR RPL], for its part, did not find the Air Force very interested in the subject." (Moran, p.9). In fact, the RAAF did not have any significant radar capacity until 1942.[2]

The RAB was cognizant of the importance of RDF, but the Service Chiefs were ambivalent. The Defence Committee (the Chiefs of Staff):" did not deal with [RDF] at all until September 1941, when the matter was urged on them by an outsider, [Fred White of CSIR, RPL]. They then referred it to the Joint Planning Committee of the Australian Military. (Moran, p. 17,18). Moran continued:

> It is It is difficult, then, to talk of a radar 'strategy' at work before the Joint Planning Committee began considering the matter in October 1941. **The fact that their consideration originated not in some initiative of the Chiefs [of Staff] but in White's persistence, and that they took up the case not of the types of radar hitherto being developed in Australia, namely ShD and ASV, but of early warning radar, reveals this very poverty of strategic thinking.** [our emphasis] However, both ShD and ASV were developed with particular defensive purposes in mind, at a time when a particular sort of threat was anticipated. Insofar as purposes and threat corresponded, one can talk of strategy, albeit a strategy whose inadequacies were suddenly illuminated by Pearl Harbour. The origins of this strategy, and a single cause of its weakness, lay in the ways Australia's position, geographical, political and military, differed from that of the country [UK] which gave her radar.

[1] Shore Defence –against ships, Air to Surface Vessel-detection of ships and submarines, Gun Laying radar- control of anti-aircraft artillery, Mobile Base- a portable air-warning set

[2] Wing Commander Pither, the "father of RAAF air warning", (1946) did not enter the picture until May 1941 (Moran, p. 14).

The results of the Battle of Britain from 10 July 1940 to 31 October 1940, showed the major contrast of the development of air warning in the UK and Australia; the attempts to apply the UK model did not succeed. Moran:

> .. Britain was ready before the event because a sufficiently large number of sufficiently influential civilian, scientific and military notables had a fairly clear picture of what would happen and, in the late 1930s, produced a calculated response … [C]hain radar was a defensive necessity, and it was made necessary by a sense of fear, acted on not without conflict or luck. This kind of fear was absent from Australia until after Pearl Harbour. Its absence is characterised by the very different view of air raids held by the Australian Chiefs of Staff [in 1939-1942]. (Moran, p. 19)

The evolving threat – from 1940 to 1942 in Australia

As events evolved in 1940, the Australian Chiefs of Staff did respond to events in Europe to draw inferences about the Japanese threat:

> Whilst there has been no material change as regards attack from German or Italian sources, it is considered that there is a possibility of attack by Japan, should she enter the war against us, and that the probable scale of such attack has increased by reason of our Naval commitments elsewhere … Since aircraft operating against this country must, in the first instance, be ship borne, the intensity of air attack to be expected, at least during the early months of active warfare in Australia, must be comparatively light. (Moran, p. 19. Minutes of the Meetings of the Chiefs, Defence Committee (DC), 15 July 1940, No. 64)

The strategic situation was assessed again by the Chiefs of Staff on 27 September 1940 (DC Minutes no. 96, Moran p. 20):

> If Japan enters the war against us, the possibility of attack will increase. The expected scale of attack against Australia in such circumstances is stated by the UK Chiefs of Staff in their Far Eastern Appreciation as "cruiser raids possibly combined with a light scale of seaborne air attacks against ports".
>
> The Australian Chiefs of Staff … were not in complete agreement with the above assessment of the scale of the attack against Australia. They considered that, in view of the containment of the Main Fleet [UK] in European waters, the Japanese might accept, as a reasonable risk, the employment of Naval Forces which would include capital ships and aircraft carriers.

The ultimate underestimation continued from the Australian Chiefs concerning air raid precautions: "[I]t should be assumed that not more than one attack is likely to be delivered on any one area in any one fortnight."

Moran (p. 20) has pointed out that the 1939 May warning was reiterated in both December 1940 and July 1941: " ... [From May 1939] [A]n Australian assessment had suggested that they should prepare for raids of an order of seventy tons of bombs in one day, to occur not more than once a fortnight." The minimising of the threat continued well into 1941: a prediction of light air raids by single aircraft from cruisers and limited attacks from carrier-born aircraft.

Then in July 1941 the Chiefs wrote (DC Minutes, no 95, 24 July 1941): "Japanese aggression against Australia may commence with operations intended to isolate us. Consequently, outlying centres such as New Guinea, Papua, Thursday Island, Darwin and Freemantle would be considered at this stage vulnerable to air attack."

Moran (p. 22):

> From July 1941 the Australian Chiefs (DC, Minutes No. 89) had claimed that the "strategic objective of Japan, at any rate in the early stages, is less likely to be Australia than other countries in the Far Eastern Area." They could study the disposition of the Japanese ships and then infer their next step, allowing the Australian forces to "assess the possibility of his detaching forces to carry out a raid".

Of course, the "tactical merits of air and sea power was still an issue muddied by inexperience". The sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* just after Pearl Harbour clarified this issue. But in July 1941 it was said that aircraft carriers were "the most vulnerable type of warship", requiring protection by other ships. Moran (p. 23): "When found … the Japanese force would be met by the Royal Australian Navy and land based aircraft of the RAAF. "That is, the threat posed by Japan and the response proposed both focused on the sea."

Moran has summarised the major strategic misstep of the Australian Military (p. 23):

> Radar strategy in Britain [in 1939-41], centred about the interception of enemy aircraft, in Australia at the same time, it centred about the interception of enemy ships … [Both ShD and ASV] were directed seaward. The Chiefs planned to respond to air raids by attacking the ships from which the raiding aircraft were launched, rather than the aircraft themselves. This was justified by the belief that, since the aircraft were seaborne, there could not be enough of them to inflict more than relatively light and infrequent raids. The object of long range, early warning was a major air raid. This did not fit the Chief's picture of what would happen.

As shown in Chapter 9 and ESM_9.3, these assumptions were completely naïve; carrier forces acting independently, support vessels, were able to inflict major damage as occurred at Pearl Harbour and two months later at Darwin.

MacKinnon (in his comprehensive compilation, **The Installation of 31 Radar Station, Darwin**, **1942, An Investigation**, from 2009) is critical of some aspects of Moran's analysis of the events

of 19 February 1942. However, the initial chapters of the Moran thesis (based on exhaustive research of the official archive of the pre-1942 era) have provided a thorough and well documented summary of the pre-Darwin RDF experience in Australia.