



## **LIEUTENANT GENERAL DAVID MORRISON, AO CHIEF OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY**

**SPEECH: SEAPOWER CONFERENCE  
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Chief of the Navy, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, distinguished guests, senior naval and military officers from all over the globe, ladies and gentlemen.

So, before proceeding further, I want to congratulate the Chief of Navy and all ranks of the RAN on attaining that marvellous milestone in your service to the nation. Yet tempering that joy is the recognition that many of your ranks have also died during that service and it is imperative and most appropriate that we mark their sacrifice as well.

Despite some good natured rivalry, the bonds between our services are deep and enduring, forged in the crucible of war with its shared perils and losses. Ray - on behalf of the Army, I salute you and the Navy team.

For reasons, which I intend to address, I believe that we as a nation sometimes fall prey to a collective amnesia about the extraordinary service of the Royal Australian Navy.

Over a century ago, the great sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote eloquently of the silent, inexorable and invisible operation of the blockade which crushed the innards of Napoleon's Empire.

The achievements of our soldiers, enhanced, indeed perhaps even distorted by the Anzac mythology, has, in my view, created a foundation narrative that has led to our Nation accepting the fruits of our maritime security as a free public good. It is as invisible as Mahan's blockade.

Our trade flows freely, our petrol stations are replenished, our supermarket shelves are full to meet our whims and our commerce flourishes. Yet, Australians collectively do not reflect on the enormous national investment involved in sustaining the maritime conditions for that happy state of affairs, nor do they consider overly that much of it is also underwritten by the United States as the leading global power of our era.

While many of Mahan's insights are today of primarily historical value, his assertion that the oceans of the world constitute ubiquitous highways is so profoundly obvious as to conceal its genius, in much the same way that Clausewitz's observation that war is the violent prosecution of policy now sounds self-evidently banal, having become conventional wisdom. That Australia is an island, albeit one of immense mass, is equally as obvious. So our survival, even in peace time, depends on the sea.

Yet, despite universal lip service to the innately maritime character of our geography, the western civilization that has grown here since European settlement has not, in my view, developed a deep, intrinsic link to that character.

As another Maritime theorist, my friend Ray Griggs told the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in 2011, that a more appropriate wording in the first stanza of our national anthem may have been 'girt by beach' rather than 'girt by sea.' He was pointing to the underdeveloped consciousness which should properly underscore mature, true sea mindedness in Australia. His point was well made and it concerns me every bit as much as it bothers him.

Our strategic culture, and the strategic policy which incubates in it, are the poorer for that cognitive failure, which is derived from a deeply entrenched continental mindset.

Last week I conducted my military history conference, the theme of which was Armies and maritime strategy. There I heard an insightful presentation from Professor Michael Evans, who I believe to be the most innovative and influential strategic thinkers currently working in Australia. He expounded on the lack of sea mindedness to which Ray Griggs had alluded in that eloquent quip in 2011.

He described Australia as a maritime nation with a continental culture. His hypothesis was carefully arrived at through delving into the national psyche and soul. He analysed the narrative of the Australian settlement, and the degree to which we define ourselves as a sunburnt country. Scrutiny of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, show a people pitted against a harsh, implacable and ultimately forbidding continental environment.

And so, while we revere the sacrifice of our diggers at Gallipoli, how many people really understand the naval and amphibious campaign which lodged us on what Chris Masters has termed The Fatal Shore? The digger legend is powerful, but it skews the way Australians view security, especially the wider contribution of this nation to the global order of the last Century and our obligations to maintaining that benign order in this one.

Yet, this absence of pervasive oceanic consciousness, disguises the fact that European settlement of this Great Southern land was achieved by the leading maritime power of that era. Likewise, it ignores the reality that our security was initially founded in no small part on Great Britain and, later, on its liberal democratic successor the United States.

In plain language, our prosperity and role in the world is reliant on freedom of navigation and the unimpeded use of Mahan's great highways which is guaranteed by the dominant maritime power of the day, at a most significant discount to the expenditure of our own national treasure.

The naval and military professionals in this room grasp this reality, but too few of our fellow citizens do as well. More worryingly, I fear the same may be true of many of some who seek to advise our policy makers.

However, this is not the counsel of despair. Australians are nothing if not pragmatic. Regardless of this myopia, our strategic practice has been intuitively shrewd. We have collaborated with the dominant liberal, democratic maritime power *du jour* since Federation and have benefitted immensely from that choice.

Again, as I reflected on Mike Evan's call to raise public consciousness about our maritime future in the rapidly growing, dynamically changing, Indo Pacific region, I recalled former Prime Minister John Howard's pithy, yet insightful, warning that Australia need not choose between its history and its geography.

Read in conjunction with Paul Keating's similarly profound insight that Australia must seek its security *in* Asia rather than *from* Asia we can discern the rapid progress Australia has made from the aberrant years when we sought to secure Australia behind the moat of the so called sea – air gap.

There is a warning in this – that because of our lack of an oceanic mindset, we risk forfeiting all those other natural elements of maritime power with which we are lavishly endowed. However, as soldier and capability manager I am optimistic about our current strategic focus. Here is why.

We have come a very long way since the strategic shock of 1999 in East Timor roused us from the torpor of the mindset of the Defence of Australia, narrowly construed as continental defence. In that regard, I would demur from John Howard in a minor, though not purely semantic, manner. As he sagely argued, we need not make a false, binary choice between our European origins and Asian geography to achieve Paul Keating's vision of security 'in Asia.' But we must choose our **TRUE** history.

We need to recognise that despite the prodigious feats of arms of our soldiers, and the romance of the bush, our soldiers have never fought a battle on our continent. May that remain so. But as long as the gap between myth and reality in our national identity and ancillary strategic culture remains so great, we will struggle to achieve our potential as a second tier maritime power.

For that classification I am indebted to that fine strategic scholar Beatrice Heuser who would situate Australia among relatively sophisticated medium powers for whom local sea control, albeit for particular periods of time, is both possible and indeed a strongly desirable capability objective. However, area sea control is unachievable for us and it remains the monopoly of great naval powers.

Of necessity we can only collaborate with compatible major powers and contribute to good order at sea and achieve limited force projection in coalition with our allies.

We are well on the way to achieving that level of maritime capability in Australia with political support across the spectrum. That vision, of a seamlessly joint ADF, structured to implement a maritime strategy in the defence of Australia, through denial of the use of our land, sea and air approaches to our nation is correct. It is supported by the ADF senior leadership and is underpinned by a Defence Capability Plan which will put flesh on the bones of that vision.

Of course it will require a shift in national resources to fund and sustain it. And in the aftermath of our longest war, fought primarily in a land-locked country, we must take the intellectual lead in explaining this to the Australian public.

After all they must fund it, and provide their sons and daughters to serve in this joint force in an era when individual opportunity and self actualisation have reduced the appeal of service careers. That is why our deficit in oceanic consciousness has the potential to undermine our centre of gravity in the pursuit of professional mastery of joint maritime warfare.

Perhaps the thousands of proud Australians who cheered the arrival of that first flotilla 100 years ago understood better than we do the nexus between an actively engaged citizenship and maritime power than we do.

As senior advisers to the Government, we must take a moral and professional lead in this. Moreover, we must be truly joint in our advocacy. As I have stated somewhat *ad nauseam*, Australia needs its ADF more than it needs its Army, Navy and Air Force and a joint maritime strategy is only as strong as its weakest service. None of us can afford the dubious luxury of short term single service 'wins' at the expense of the coherence of our maritime capability.

Again, I have never been more optimistic as to our future notwithstanding the climate of austerity which is setting the tenor of our strategic debate. In my remaining time today I shall explain how Army's modernisation axis of advance is inherently joint and postures us to take play our role in our maritime strategy as described under extant strategic guidance.

In general, Armies modernise by drawing lessons from their operations and calibrating their experience against history and the changing character of war as determined by technological change and politico-cultural trends. After a decade at war, and even longer on sustained operations across a diverse range of threat environments, against a range of foes, we have moved quickly to enhance our firepower, to digitise our sensor shooter links and better align our command and control systems to our higher joint-operational headquarters. Internally we have also better aligned our force generation cycles to strategic guidance.

We are in the midst of the most comprehensive re-equipment and modernisation program since the end of the Second World War. The end state will be an army that can generate combined arms effects in a joint

coalition setting while surviving against either a peer competitor or a potent irregular enemy.

We are re-organising to field three standard multi – role medium weight combat brigades. We are shifting from a light infantry army to a light mechanised army deployable by sea rather than just air and capable of implementing the guidance of the government which decrees that we be able to deploy a battalion group for a contingency with our Primary Operating Environment, while simultaneously sustaining a brigade group on operations in the immediate neighbourhood.

Plan Beersheba rounds out the improvements begun in the wake of the 1999 East Timor crisis, which spawned that guidance and the derivative roles and tasks for the Army and ADF.

Significantly, the introduction of the Landing Helicopter Docks (LHD) will be a transformative development. Developing an army component capable of 'wet soldiering'.

The devil will be in the detail. The range of specialist skills, trades and employment codes to conduct even permissive entry operations is formidable. Delivering land effects from sea platforms is the most demanding military task that can be asked of a joint force. Few nations on earth can achieve it. We will soon be joining that elite club. But the price of admission is high and we need to bring our society with us if we are to achieve it. It requires a national commitment not an ADF plan.

There is much to be done. But as we reflect on the challenges that our remote nation overcame to fund, design and build that majestic fleet which steamed into this great harbour 100 years ago, we must surely conclude that we are capable of meeting any future challenge if we can muster even a portion of their resolve and patriotism.