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NEW ZEALAND.

# COLONIAL DEFENCES:

(REMARKS BY COLONIAL DEFENCE COMMITTEE ON REPORTS BY MAJOR-GENERAL J. BEVAN EDWARDS, C.B.)

*Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.*

## PROPOSED ORGANIZATION OF THE MILITARY FORCES OF THE AUSTRALASIAN COLONIES.

THE Colonial Defence Committee\* have had under consideration the Reports of Major-General J. B. Edwards, C.B., on the Military Forces and Defence of the Australasian Colonies, which have been referred to them by the Secretaries of State for War and the Colonies. While, for reasons which will be stated, they are unable to agree in some of the recommendations embodied in these reports, they are impressed by the ability displayed, and the care which has been bestowed upon them.

Before proceeding to consider the recommendations of the Inspecting Officer in the case of the individual colonies, the Committee desire to reassert the general principles which should guide these colonies in adjusting the standard of their defences. It is essential that such principles should be constantly borne in mind, since the absence of a definite basis of policy necessarily leads to wasteful expenditure.

The general requirements of defence which present themselves to the Australasian Colonies depend solely upon the probable nature and strength of the attack. No country can be provided against every remote contingency which may be suggested, and reasonable probabilities, rather than possibilities, form the ultimate basis of the war preparations of every great Power.

The Colonial Defence Committee have in various memoranda expressed their views as to the conditions of probable attack in Australasian waters, and these views have been embodied in Colonial Office circular despatch of the 14th January, 1890.

It may be useful, however, to recapitulate these conditions.

On account of their geographical position, and of the now considerable population in all these colonies except Western Australia, there is no British territory so little liable to aggression as that of Australasia. In view of the armed forces maintained, and the strong spirit which animates them, territorial aggression, except on a large scale, is out of the question. To endeavour to place small bodies of troops on shore would be to court disaster, with consequent injury to the prestige of any Power which attempted such a policy. Any force, destined for aggression, even if safely landed, must be of a strength sufficient to conquer and hold either an important strategic point, or a considerable portion of territory, under the certain condition of losing its communications by sea.

Field operations on Australasian territory would require a large expeditionary force of all arms, fully equipped; and the idea of attempting such operations with the small landing force available, even from a strong squadron of cruisers, may be altogether dismissed.

It is evident that transport for a large expeditionary force could not be prepared in any of the advanced bases of any Power without the fact being known, when a corresponding redistribution, if necessary, of the British navy would be made.

Such an expedition, whether despatched from an advanced base or from Europe, could not hope to reach its destination until the British navy had been definitely worsted. Even then the difficulties and the risks would be so considerable, that, in view of other enterprises of a more hopeful nature, it is almost inconceivable that the attempt would be made. History affords no parallel of such difficulties successfully overcome.

Attack upon the Australian littoral thus reduces itself to raids by an enemy's cruisers based upon his defended ports. Such raids might be undertaken to obtain coal, which might be urgently required, or with the object of attempting to extort an indemnity under threat of bombardment. Coal, if on shore, could not be seized, even in a port possessing no coast defences, without landing men, and, in view of the small crews carried by cruisers, this proceeding would be extremely dangerous in face of armed and organized resistance. It is inconceivable that any Australasian

\* The Colonial Defence Committee is now charged with the duty of considering the larger questions of Imperial defence. Its Chairman is the Inspector-General of Fortifications, and its members are the Directors of Naval and Military Intelligence, and officers representing the Departments of the Adjutant-General and of the Director of Artillery.

town would consent to pay blackmail, which the British race have not submitted to for upwards of a thousand years. Moreover, in view of the difficulty of obtaining fresh supplies of ammunition, and the fact that the expenditure of the whole of the shell carried by a squadron of cruisers would fail to work serious destruction upon any large town, and that such a proceeding would inevitably provoke severe reprisals, it is in the last degree improbable that a bombardment would be attempted.

As regards liability to cruiser raids, the primary factors are the distance of the bases and the relative naval strength of possible enemies to that of the British Squadron in Australasian waters strengthened by the aid of the funds provided by all the colonies except Queensland.

The nearest French port is Nouméa, distant about 780 miles from Brisbane, 1,100 miles from Sydney, and 1,100 miles from Auckland. The next in point of distance is Saigon, 3,700 miles from Brisbane and 4,800 miles from Auckland. The other bases of France, Réunion and Diego Suarez, are distant respectively 3,400 and 4,300 miles from Perth.

Nouméa does not, however, possess the qualifications of a base, and the position of the French in New Caledonia in the event of war would be necessarily precarious. Defence rather than aggression would be their probable object. Saigon falls within the scope of the British China Squadron, and could not be made use of as a base till that squadron had been defeated. Réunion and Diego Suarez are too far away to serve as bases without intermediate links which do not exist.

Vladivostock, the only possible base of any other great Power, 4,900 miles from Brisbane, is closed by ice during from three to four months in the year, and the line of action therefrom passes through waters defended by the British China Squadron.

Finally, although raids are not absolutely barred by the presence in the waters of a superior force, the risks they entail are thus greatly increased, and the temptation to undertake them is definitely lessened. The naval force of Great Britain is far superior in Australasian waters to that of any other Power or combination of Powers, and its strength can, if it were necessary, be increased more rapidly than that of any other Power.

The above conditions appear to the Colonial Defence Committee to supply a solid basis upon which the standard of the armaments of the Australasian Colonies may safely rest; but, although they have been set forth at various times, there has been an evident tendency to ignore them, as was pointed out in the Colonial Defence Committee's remarks on Major-General Schaw's Report on the Defences of New South Wales. It is unfortunate that these principles have not been more widely grasped, since their realisation would unquestionably have prevented the great exaggeration of danger and the erroneous conception of what is really to be apprehended, which have from time to time been manifested.

Unobstructed routes for the transport of their products are of vital importance to the Australasian Colonies, and the most probable danger lies neither in territorial aggression nor, so long as efficient land forces are maintained, in raids upon colonial ports, but in the loss of mercantile ships in the neighbourhood of the ports. One of the principal results of the large supersession of sailing-vessels by steamers for the purposes of the mercantile marine is that ordinary peace routes need not be adhered to in ocean passages, so that the capture of vessels on the high seas becomes largely a matter of chance, and the performance of the "Alabama" could not now be repeated. On the other hand, this new condition increases the danger to trade at points of necessary convergence, and in the vicinity of ports.

Defence against dangers of this nature can only be provided by naval means.

With these considerations before them, the Colonial Defence Committee are unable to concur with Major-General Edwards in his expression of opinion that it is necessary to contemplate the concentration of a force of "30,000 or 40,000 men" for defence against territorial aggression. This appears to be a contingency so excessively improbable that it need not be taken into account as one of the requirements of Australasian defence.

The military preparations of these colonies should, in the opinion of the Committee, be based on other grounds. Australia and New Zealand possess an enormous coast-line, with numerous points against which such raids as have been referred to might possibly be directed. In the absence of any organized force on shore, even a small number of men landed for a short time would be able to inflict grave damage. To meet these requirements, it appears to be essential to provide an adequate force well organized and capable of being rapidly mobilised, since it is at the outset of war that the probability of a raid is greatest. So soon as the command of the sea in this quarter of the world has been fought for, or conceded without fighting by an enemy, the probability will diminish.

In the event of a great war, the military resources of the Empire will be heavily taxed, and the responsibility for land defence must necessarily rest with the colonies which have willingly accepted it. As it would be of great importance to dislocate the industrial machinery as little as possible, reliefs of garrisons and posts would doubtless be required, entailing the maintenance of a higher total strength than would be necessary in the case of a standing army.

In carrying out the military defence of the coast-line, occasions may evidently arise where a transference of troops from one colony to another may be desirable. The Committee, therefore, consider that assimilation of organization, as urged by the Royal Commission in 1882, is of great importance. The defence of Continental Australia, including Tasmania, cannot be satisfactorily dealt with in piecemeal fashion; and by adopting a common system, and providing for the easy transference of troops from one colony to another, a definite gain of strength would be obtained. From this point of view, as well as in a commercial aspect, the assimilation of railway-gauge, which Major-General Edwards has urged, appears highly desirable.

Finally, the Colonial Defence Committee desire to point out that the rôle which the Australian Colonies will probably play in the event of war is not likely to be limited to the passive defence of ports little liable to attack. These colonies will doubtless desire that solid guarantees for future security should be taken, and it is evidently essential to success in this sense that their land forces should be organized on a common basis so as to be capable of being brought together for concerted

action. The possibility of being able to take a vigorous offensive at the outset of war against points which might subsequently prove menacing would be a strategic advantage of the first importance.

For the above reasons the Colonial Defence Committee, while differing from the line of argument followed by Major-General Edwards, concur generally in the strength of the forces he lays down.

As regards the standard of coast armaments, the conditions above laid down supply a definite basis. For the purpose of dealing with the class of vessels which alone will be found in Australasian waters, the 6-inch gun will amply suffice, and by its great handiness and speed of fire will prove more effective than the heavier natures. The cost of armaments and emplacements rapidly rises as calibres increase, and by restricting the size of their guns in future the colonies will secure economy, efficiency, and simplicity at the same time.

The most important question with which the colonies have to deal is that of organization, and the Colonial Defence Committee concur with Major-General Edwards in considering that the brigade unit is most suitable. They are, however, of opinion that the population basis cannot well be adopted as fixing the relative strength of the forces of individual colonies, and that, as regards New South Wales and Victoria, it will suffice for present requirements if each of those colonies furnishes two brigades.

The basis of the organization should be a nucleus of permanent troops and a "partially-paid" force, capable of expansion, and it appears most desirable that the conditions of service and training, and, if it can be arranged, the rates of pay, should be common to all the colonies, and that the same general standard of efficiency should be maintained. The principle of a small cadre battalion proposed by Major-General Edwards appears sound; but the Colonial Defence Committee are unable to regard the rifle companies as at present fulfilling the conditions of a reserve; for, while it is undoubtedly most desirable to encourage proficiency in rifle-shooting by means of these companies, they appear in some cases to be only private associations assisted by the Colonial Governments, and not under a general obligation to serve in the ranks in case of need. It would be a doubtful expedient to flood the small battalions with untrained men at the outset of war, and rifle companies can only be looked upon as a practicable reserve on condition of receiving some drill and training, possessing uniforms, and being accustomed to discipline.

It is, therefore, for serious consideration whether a real reserve could not be formed of men who have passed through the ranks of the partially-paid forces, and might receive a small retaining fee;\* or whether the organization of the rifle companies could be placed on a partially military basis.

The amalgamation of the artillery and submarine mining services appears desirable in principle, if difficulties arising from differences in rates of pay, &c., can be overcome; but "Australian Coast Corps" would seem a more desirable designation than "Fortress Corps" in the case of a portion of the Empire where fortresses are not required and could not under any circumstances be maintained.

The Colonial Defence Committee consider that all the mounted forces should be organized and trained as mounted infantry. Cavalry, in the European sense, are not required to meet the probable conditions under which any Australian force would be employed.

The general assimilation of uniform, as proposed by Major-General Edwards, is most desirable, and a service-dress should be adopted. The decision as to pattern is a matter for joint consideration; but the Colonial Defence Committee agree with Major-General Edwards in deprecating the choice of red as the colour. The adoption of smokeless powder, which will certainly shortly take place, renders it more than ever necessary that troops should not be clothed in a dress of conspicuous colour.

The provision of a joint Colonial Military College would be a great advantage, as pointed out by the Royal Commission of 1882. Such an institution would promote uniformity of training, and would serve to focus problems of colonial defence, and lead discussion into proper channels.

Turning to the specific recommendations made by Major-General Edwards in regard to individual colonies, the Colonial Defence Committee desire to offer a few remarks in certain cases.

#### *New Zealand.*

The Colonial Defence Committee have dealt with the defence of New Zealand in their remarks of the 10th April, 1888, upon Major-General Schaw's report. While generally concurring in Major-General Edwards's recommendations, they deprecate the transference of more than half the naval artillery to the rifle companies. The naval artillery appears, judging from its numbers, to be a popular force in the colony, and any reduction should be very gradual. It would be advisable to introduce the partially-paid system, as calculated to give a higher standard of efficiency than is provided by a purely Volunteer force. On account of the distance (1,200 miles) which separates New Zealand from continental Australia, the Colonial Defence Committee consider that the defence of New Zealand must be dealt with independently, and they doubt whether any advantage would be gained by amalgamating the Permanent Artillery and Submarine Mining Force of this colony with those of the remaining colonies. They are of opinion that it is desirable to provide a better infantry weapon than the Snider, but they consider that a total stand of 8,000, in place of the 16,000 recommended, would amply suffice.

\* Such a reserve has already been established in Victoria, but does not at present appear to be entirely successful.

