

SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE AUSTRALIA

ISSUE 6 AUGUST 2003

IRAQ LESSONS: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Echoing earlier wars, the successful conclusion of combat operations in Iraq has brought with it the expected flood of analysis from defence commentators. Within Australia there have already been calls to cancel or reduce the scale of some planned capabilities while accelerating the adoption of others more 'appropriate' to a seamless transitioned force. Although the term 'revolution in military affairs', or RMA, appears to have fallen from prominence, the Second Gulf War has evidently witnessed such a revolution, one which has delivered such 'a devastating shock to traditional notions of Australia's military' that it is now 'set to sweep aside years of military culture'.¹ Even the notion that Australia's security interests are determined by geography has now been 'firmly' repudiated.²



The media may rapidly pick up on such themes, but they tend to lack both understanding and depth of analysis. The classic example from 1991 was the emphatic, 'Gulf Lesson One is the value of air power', attributed to the US President, but thereafter adopted by those seeking to address Australian security concerns with a silver bullet. The 2003 version may well be 'Network-Centric Warfare is the warfare of the future' because, we are informed, 'the game is different in the networked environment'.³ The e-battlespace is obviously vital, and there is a strong case for the better linking of remote sensors and platforms, but some commentators seem either too ready to confuse the means with the desired end or are unaware of the need for

a more considered approach to the spectrum of ADF operations.

The ADF is not simply a cut-down version of the US military, and concepts of transition applicable to a global power should not be adopted in isolation, nor used to obscure the unique nature of our circumstances. For example, the RAN's limited number of warships are often required to undertake a far wider and more nuanced mission than their USN counterparts. The influence of geography on Australian security can likewise never be ignored, simply because Australia endures as a physically large and widely dispersed maritime nation, one for which any possible military movement, either as threat or contribution, must travel on, over or under the sea. Information, vital though it is to the allocation of assets, cannot directly substitute for physical presence. What use a future ADF that has misjudged the balance between systems and equipment to the extent that it cannot afford sufficient platforms?

Similarly dangerous is the belief that technical solutions may somehow replace a robust operational doctrine founded on many years of experience. Although the Navy is a technology-based organisation, our appreciation of these technologies is firmly rooted in the historical perspective. Our tools must never be allowed to drive the way we need to fight. As Dr Andrew Gordon has argued in one of the Sea Power Centre's most recent publications,⁴ the purveyors of a new technology almost always oversell the revolutionary nature of their deliveries; offering untested certainties while holding back on vulnerabilities. No matter how good the preparations, the practice of warfare will never be perfectly rational, and hence there is no substitute for the inherent flexibility of a well-trained, disciplined force which has managed to get its culture, doctrine and practices lined up with its operational tasks. In fact, while the character of conflicts may change, the deeper one looks the more certain it is that the enduring principles of war have changed hardly at all.

This would all come as no surprise to any student of naval history and strategy. More than a century ago, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, USN, attempted to define the principles of sea power in an age of technological transition. He recognised the influence that control of the sea exerted on campaigns and understood that the principal impact of technology was on tactics and that, while strategic and

¹ M. Forbes 'The lessons of Iraq are set to transform Australia's military structure', *Age*, 3 May 2003.

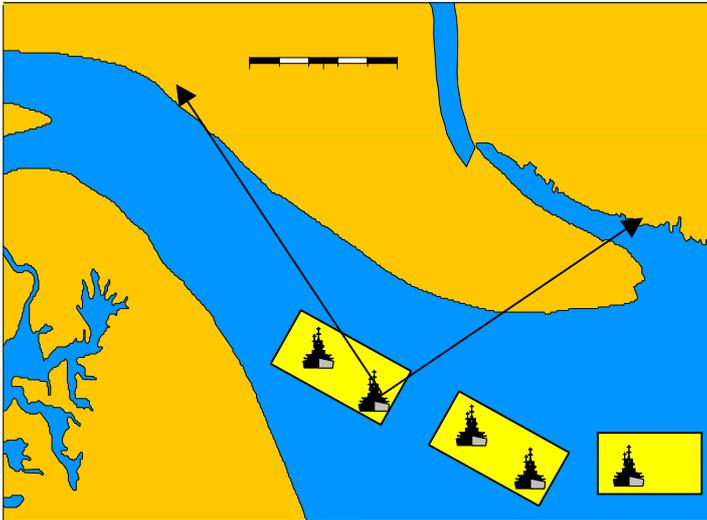
² A. Dupont, 'Straightjacket off as defence gets real', *Australian*, 27 February 2003.

³ See Forbes above.

⁴ *The Face of Naval Battle*, Allen & Unwin, 2003



doctrinal ideals may be modified by scientific developments, they will not be fundamentally altered.⁵ In consequence, success in the 'warfare of the future' is likely to be just as firmly based on a willingness to accept risks, a preparedness to use one's initiative, and the ability to recognise when a decisive moment has arrived. This requires a warfighting and cultural ethos that goes far beyond systems management.



To better illustrate these enduring features, one might point to the use of naval gunfire support (NGS) on 21-22 March 2003, during the Royal Marine (RM) assault on the Al Faw Peninsula. The USN had employed battleship NGS with considerable effect in 1991, but by 2003 the battleships had long gone and the USN had built up a measure of institutional resistance to the task, preferring instead to rely on air delivered weapons. Reinforcing this perception, the USN's cruisers and destroyers, although still mounting a 5-inch gun, were physically and operationally unsuited to the navigational constraints of Iraqi coastal waters. The RAN and Royal Navy, by contrast, gave an NGS capability far more prominence and possessed ships in the Gulf ideally suited to the mission. Indeed, HMAS *Anzac* was arguably the most effective ship available, both in terms of mounting the most powerful gun and in carrying the most ammunition. Equally important, the RAN's long-term presence in the area meant that its understanding of the littoral environment was unsurpassed. In consequence, the USN Commander was persuaded to preserve the NGS option, a decision vindicated by the manner in which events unfolded.

Not only did poor weather and competing tasks restrict the use of tactical air support during the RM assault, but Iraqi beach mining also hampered the landing of artillery and light armour. As such, the four warships poised offshore undertook a more vital than expected role, providing highly accurate and responsive indirect fire for 48 hours rather than the originally planned 24. Of particular note was the

aggressive yet restrained way in which this support was used. With 'dumb' rounds relatively inexpensive—in comparison to precision guided munitions—and a sensor to shooter response time measured in seconds rather than minutes, it was possible to provide a finely tuned psychological as well as a physical effect. Targets could be rapidly shifted as the tactical situation evolved and at times this meant that, even in well-protected positions, enemy troops could be encouraged to surrender or moved in a particular direction. The ships were later advised by 3 Commando Brigade that their gunfire had had a 'huge impact on the ground and shattered the enemy will to fight'.

NGS is hardly a new technique, but it is difficult to imagine a better means of offering such a swift, persistent, economic and most importantly, measured means of response. The lesson, however, is not that one capability is more effective than another, but that a commander must possess a range of capabilities that can be adapted to provide the desired effect in the circumstances that exist at the time. Having established sea control, Australia's deployed maritime assets were able to operate successfully in a multi-threat environment, and were simultaneously employed on multiple tasks ranging from air and surface defence to surveillance and boarding operations. Our men and women consistently demonstrated their professionalism and initiative, while our ships exhibited the inherent characteristics of mobility, access, readiness, persistence and flexibility that continue to make maritime power the great enabling instrument. As Defence responds to demands for a radical cultural and equipment shift,⁶ we would do well to remember the need for balance, for some things do not change and, no matter how well networked, it is only the well-practised combination of people, hardware, and doctrine which can apply the effect.

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⁵ A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company 1890).

⁶ M. Walsh and F. Benchley, 'The Defence Matrix', *Bulletin*, 3 June 2003.

