1918, VICTORY AT SEA

Who strangled all our Enemies by Blockade?
Who drove the High Seas Fleet to Mutiny?
Who beat the U-boats?
Who carried and protected our Soldiers and Food?
Who saved us from Invasion?
THE NAVY. God Bless Them!

Sir Eric Geddes, First Lord of the Admiralty, 11 November 1918

Much of the media and academic commentary on Australian Defence Force (ADF) capabilities displays a regrettable tendency to try and match like with like at the unit level, usually making little reference to the activities of enabling or contributing forces. Hence, comments are made that ‘navies exist to fight navies’ or, when analysing the potential of the new Joint Strike Fighter, dogfighting comparisons are made directly with Russian fighter designs. The problem with this type of approach is that in a modern joint force few if any elements are designed to deploy and operate alone. Indeed, the need for Australia to maintain a balanced defence force has as much to do with mutual support as it does the ADF’s ability to operate across the operational spectrum. More seriously, by ignoring the contribution made by diverse force elements it is easy to overlook the combination of factors which may bring about ultimate success in an operation or campaign.

Commemorations surrounding the 90th anniversary of the World War I Armistice illustrate the problem. For obvious reasons the focus of much of the commentary in Australia has always been on the victory on the Western Front. Here the struggle was at its most brutal and personal, with the successful Allied land offensives in the final months a welcome relief after the stalemate of preceding years. The sacrifice of those who fought and died in the trenches is clearly worth remembering, yet it is essential to keep in mind that this aspect was only part of a wider picture.

The war at sea is one aspect that often receives little recognition, yet its significance to the outcome was by no means secondary. To put it simply, the war could not have been won if the Allied countries had not been supplied with adequate quantities of food for their people and raw material for their industries. Neither could their armies have been sustained in the field without adequate munitions, logistic supplies and regular reinforcements. As ever all this cargo had to be moved by sea, and thus the maintenance of adequate shipping tonnage remained of prime concern throughout the war. Indeed, both sides saw the war’s economic dimension as decisive. The German Naval Staff advised the Kaiser in 1916: ‘Our war aim, apart from destroying the English Fleet as the principal means by which Britain controls its Empire, is to reduce its total economy in the quickest possible time, bringing Great Britain to sue for unconditional peace’.

Fortunately, 1918 was not a year of naval crisis for the Allies. The challenge posed by Germany’s unrestricted U-Boat campaign had been finally met during 1917 by the progressive introduction of convoy and by the deployment of increasing numbers of escort vessels and aircraft. For Britain’s wartime prime minister, David Lloyd George, this marked the real decision point of the conflict. Not only did the failure of the U-boats ensure survival at home and the continuance of the war effort, but it also precipitated the German Army’s ultimately fatal offensives of Spring 1918.

Meanwhile, the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet (which included HMA Ships Australia, Sydney and Melbourne) continued their prolonged face off across the North Sea. Relative inactivity should not be equated with marginalisation. Each fleet understood the threat they posed to the other. But whereas the German commander recognised that he could not risk battle except under the most favourable circumstances, his British counterpart was well aware that he was ‘the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon’. The Grand Fleet therefore pursued a successful policy of containment, ready to pounce should the Germans appear in the North Sea, but unwilling to risk situations where a local...
The battlecruiser HMAS Australia at the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in the Firth of Forth, 21 November 1918, by Arthur Burgess (AWM ART00192)

Perhaps because they usually operate over the horizon and out of sight, the activities of Australia’s naval forces seem particularly prone to strategic ignorance. Yet, it has long been accepted that navies fight at sea only for the strategic effect they can secure ashore, where people live. They are primarily a means to gain strategic leverage. For those wishing to understand the role of maritime forces in the future ADF it is a feature worth remembering.

4 AC Bell, A History of the Blockade of Germany 1914-1918, Historical Section, Committee of Imperial Defence, 1937, pp. 671, 672.
5 WWII civilian deaths attributable to bombing: Germany, 305,000; Japan, 806,000. See ‘The Effects of Bombing on German Morale’, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, US Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 7; and, Summary Report (Pacific War), p. 92.