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Big Ships, Big Challenge

In 2014/2015, the Royal Australian Navy plans to commission two Amphibious Assault Ships, also known as LHDs (Landing Helicopter Dock). Named HMAS Canberra and HMAS Adelaide, at around 30,700 short tons displacement, they will be the biggest warships the RAN has ever operated. By comparison, the service's last aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne, which was paid-off in 1982, displaced a mere 17,630 short tons.

In other words, Australia's new LHDs are very big ships. The capabilities they will bring to the ADF, and the implications inherent in their deployment, mean that they will also bring very big challenges.

Each ship will be able to carry about 1000 combat soldiers with all of their weapons, ammunition, vehicles and supplies; and of disembarking them with helicopters and watercraft. An air group of 16 to 24 helicopters can be embarked, perhaps a mix of Navy and Army multi-role MRH-90s and combat MH-60R Seahawks, and Army Tiger Armed Reconnaissance Helicopters. The LHDs might also embark Army CH-47 Chinooks, which while too large for the helicopter deck could operate from the flight deck.

That flight deck, incidentally, will include a ski-jump ramp to facilitate the operation of STOVL strike/fighter aircraft. Presently the ADF has no plans to acquire ship-capable strike/fighters – but more on that later.

It should be self-evident that a fully-loaded LHD will constitute a formidable weapons system. It should also be self-evident that any operational deployment outside Australian waters will demand the best possible protection. The loss of an LHD and its embarked forces would be a national disaster of the highest order.

There are suggestions that the LHDs will only be used in “permissive” environments. This is an unsound concept. Even if a deployment started under permissive conditions, the task force would still have to be prepared for non-permissive operations, to guard against the possibility of a change of circumstances during transit, or even after arrival. Any inability to deal with a suddenly-emerging, non-permissive environment could compel the Australian Government into an embarrassing, even dangerous, back down.

This means that any operational deployment would need some degree of protection from hostile aircraft, submarines, surface ships, stand-off missiles, and ISR systems. Suddenly, the development of a concept of operations sounds like headache material.

There is also the politics of operating a weapons system of this magnitude. It needs to be understood that any Government decision to deploy an LHD operationally will constitute an extreme expression of foreign policy. The appearance over the horizon of an LHD with embarked troops and Army and Navy Aviation, probably protected by air warfare destroyers, submarines, Anzac-class frigates, AEW&C, F-35/F-18 fighters, AP-3C Orions, and KC-30 tankers, will inevitably generate a strategic effect, regardless of what may be intended.

In short, the LHDs are a very big deal. The Williams Foundation is concerned that the political/strategic implications of bringing them onto the ADF's order of battle are not well-understood.

Things do not get any easier when the training implications are considered. Manoeuvring hundreds of armed people on a (perhaps) pitching deck, while helicopters and watercraft are arriving and departing, is a very complex and potentially dangerous business. Command and control of the air group is equally complex. How is air defence coordinated? When does the control of embarked helicopters transfer from the maritime commander to the land commander? And so on.

There are good reasons why only the best defence forces are able to operate Amphibious Assault Ships. The ADF is of course one of the world's best military organisations, but it has almost no experience in this business. It is clear that there are major issues related to training and preparedness that need to be addressed sooner rather than later.

To return to the question of embarked strike/fighters. Australia is in the process of acquiring up to 100 Joint Strike Fighters, all of which are to be the conventional F-35A variant. However, the F-35 will come in a STOVL variant, the F-35B. The question is: will the introduction of the LHDs generate pressure for the ADF to acquire a small number of F-35Bs?

Ship-borne fighter operations are enormously complex and expensive. At the same time, when done properly, they provide a unique capability by removing in one fell stroke the perennial strike/fighter problem of range and endurance. Take your own fighters with you, and that particular dimension of control of the air has been addressed. Great Britain's recapture of the Falklands Islands from occupying Argentineans in 1982 could not have succeeded without the fleet protection provided by embarked RN and RAF Harrier strike/fighters.

Whatever the government and the ADF might be saying now, it is certain that, as the in-service date for the LHDs grows closer, calls to acquire STOVL F-35Bs for the Fleet Air Arm will increase. There's nothing wrong with that; on the contrary. But we do need to understand the issues.

Any one of the challenges outlined above warrants serious attention; in combination, they constitute a compelling case for action at almost every level of Defence planning.

*By Alan Stephens, Deputy Chairman
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