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PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

MEMORANDUM ON COLONIAL DEFENCE.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency's Command.



COLONIAL DEFENCE.

[*Mercury*, 30th August, 1890.]

Downing-street, June 27, 1890.

SIR,

I HAVE the honour to transmit to you, for communication to your Government, copies of a memorandum which has been prepared by the Colonial Defence Committee at my request, and that of the Secretary of State for War, on the reports recently drawn up by Major-General Edwards in regard to the defences of the Australasian colonies.

It will be seen that, except in regard to a few matters relating to individual colonies, the Colonial Defence Committee concur generally in Major-General Edwards' recommendations. As to the broad principles which should guide the Australasian colonies in fixing the standard of their defences, however, the Committee, with full knowledge of the resources of other powers, are unable to accept the point of view from which the Inspecting Officer appears to regard the Military requirements of this portion of the Empire.

It is of the utmost importance that clear and definite views as to the nature of these requirements should be arrived at. Failing this, no proper scale of defence can be laid down, and expenditure wasteful, because misdirected, is inevitable.

In recommending this memorandum to the careful consideration of your Government, I desire to point out that the Colonial Defence Committee is specially charged with considering the larger questions of Imperial Defence, that its chairman is the Inspector-General of fortifications, and that the directors of *Naval and Military Intelligence*, as well as officers representing the departments of Adjutant-General and of the Director of Artillery, are members. The Committee has thus at its disposal all the available information in regard to the strength and resources of foreign powers, and its views therefore will naturally have due weight with the Australasian colonies.

While as regards purely local matters the Colonial Governments will doubtless be disposed to accept the opinions of the Commandants of their Forces, who are their military advisers upon the spot, I may point out that these officers were selected in regard to their qualification for the purposes of special duty only; and that however able they may be they have neither the knowledge nor the experience necessary to qualify them to deal with the larger questions of Imperial Defence, for the consideration of which the Colonial Defence Committee was formed.

I am led to make the above remarks by the perusal of a paper recently drawn up by the Commandant of the Queensland Forces, in which it is stated that he sees "no serious difficulty to an enemy in landing *20,000 or 30,000 men on the coast of Queensland."

If this opinion were sound it is evident that the standard of defence of the Australasian Colonies would require to be raised to an extent which could not be contemplated; but it cannot be accepted, inasmuch as it is inconsistent with experience based upon a knowledge of the resources of other powers, and of the possibilities of naval warfare.

If the general aspect of the military position of the Australasian colonies, as clearly laid down by the Colonial Defence Committee, is rightly understood, it will be seen that the main requirements are (1) moderate local defences, and (2) an organisation which will enable those defences to be available at short notice.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient humble servant,

KNUTSFORD.

* These figures are a clerical error. The numbers stated by Colonel French, Commandant of Queensland, were from 2000 to 3000.

PROPOSED ORGANISATION OF THE MILITARY FORCES OF THE AUSTRAL- ASIAN COLONIES.

REPORTS BY MAJOR-GENERAL J. BEVAN EDWARDS, C.B.

REMARKS BY COLONIAL DEFENCE COMMITTEE.

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 January 14, 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, designed 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 dispatched 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 organised resistance. It is inconceivable that any Australasian 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 Noumea, distant about 780 miles from Brisbane, 1100 miles from Sydney, and 1100 miles from Auckland. The next in point of distance is Saigon, 3700 miles from Brisbane and 4800 miles from Auckland. The other bases of France, Réunion and Diego Suarez, are distant respectively 3400 and 4300 miles from Perth.

Noumea 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, 4900 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 performances of the *Alabama* could not now be repeated. On the other hand, this 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 organised 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 organised 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 organisation, 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 organised 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 in. 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 organisation, 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 organisation 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 organisation 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 organised 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 SOUTH WALES.

For the reasons above given the Committee do not consider that it is necessary to provide against "the attack of a powerful squadron" upon Sydney. They are, however, strongly impressed with

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

the need of an organisation which would enable the ports of New South Wales to be adequately defended at short notice. Such an organisation appears to be more needed than increased works and armaments.

The Committee consider that the armament proposed by Major-General Edwards will suffice for the requirements of Sydney, and they do not concur in the recommendation that a Brennan torpedo should be provided. Nor do they accept, as of general application, the opinion that, "as compared with the artillery," the Brennan torpedo is "inexpensive and much more effectual."

The necessity for preserving secrecy in regard to the position of guns and details of defence was brought before the Conference in 1887, and at various times been impressed upon the Colonial Governments. It is earnestly to be hoped that these warnings will in future be acted upon.

The Committee do not consider that in any case the establishment of a central gun-wharf at Sydney is advisable. The distances being so great, no advantage would be gained by this centralisation, or by despatching to Sydney guns or ordnance stores intended for Adelaide or Port Phillip.

The suggested provision of camp equipment for 15,000 men appears in excess of all possible requirements, especially in such a climate as New South Wales possesses.

VICTORIA.

The Colonial Defence Committee have in previous papers pointed out that no further expenditure on armament is required, and have deprecated the construction of a work on the Pope's Eye Shoal. They do not consider that it is necessary to provide against the attack of "a powerful fleet," and they are unable to concur in the suggestion that "two or three powerful guns" are needed at Point Lonsdale.

They concur with Major-General Edwards in the inutility of the keep proposed for the Queenscliff Battery.

As regards the ammunition for coast defence guns, they consider that a total provision of 200 rounds per gun will amply suffice, and they point out that the number (300) laid down by Major-General Edwards is not provided in defences in Imperial charge.

QUEENSLAND AND THURSDAY ISLAND.

While agreeing with Major-General Edwards that, in a certain sense, the coastline of Queensland "is more open to attack than any other part of Australia," the committee regard the existence of the Barrier Reefs as affording great protection from the naval point of view. An enemy, unless in preponderating force in Australian waters, would be little likely to attempt operations inside these reefs, where he would be liable to be caught.

They are therefore unable to concur in the recommendation of the acquisition by the colony of "three or four first-class torpedo-boats." Such craft would be very costly, both in the first instance and in upkeep, and it would be difficult to render them efficient unless permanent crews were maintained.

As regards Thursday Island, the committee have already expressed their opinion. They consider that the strength of the permanent garrison laid down by Major-General Edwards ("twenty gunners and submarine miners") is too low for a position so isolated, even if it proves practicable to obtain a "thoroughly efficient partially paid local force." They consider that in any case it would be necessary to reinforce the garrison, in the event of war, to the total strength originally proposed, viz., 225 men. They do not regard the provision of submarine mines as necessary, even if the local conditions were favourable to their employment.

TASMANIA.

The Colonial Defence Committee have already dealt with the defence of Tasmania in connection with the local scheme of defence. The distance of the Tasmanian ports from any practicable hostile base is so great that moderate measures of defence, combined with a high standard of organisation for war, are alone required.

The Committee agree that the provision of a small force of mounted infantry is desirable, and they have already pointed out, in their remarks on the local scheme of defence, that an increase of about 450 infantry is required.

While they consider that it would be desirable to obtain a small armament to be utilised on the local tugs for patrol purposes, they deprecate the provision of first-class torpedo-boats and the raising of a naval force.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

The Colonial Defence Committee consider that the small squadron of lancers might with advantage be converted into mounted infantry.

As regards Glenelg Fort, which Major-General Edwards appears to wish to abolish, the Committee understand that the intention of this work was not to provide direct protection for the City of Adelaide. The coast-line is extremely open, and Port Adelaide, which is rapidly growing, and will probably before long possess large docks, has no natural advantages for defence. Under these circumstances, the Committee do not regard an armament of four breach-loading guns as excessive, and cannot concur in its reduction. It is, however, a matter for consideration whether the two guns proposed for Glenelg should not be mounted somewhat nearer to Port Adelaide, but separated from each other by a considerable interval. In any case, there appears to be no necessity whatever for creating a large and expensive enclosed work, as the available infantry force should amply suffice to prevent a landing. As they have already stated, the Committee consider that 6in. guns would be sufficiently powerful; but as the 9.2in. guns have been provided, it would be advisable to retain them here rather than transfer them to the defence of Princess Royal Harbour, King George's Sound, or to Port Darwin, both of which points will for some years be less in need of the more powerful ordnance. The view put forward that the existence of these guns would legalise the bombardment of Glenelg seems to have no value. Even if all defence were dispensed with, bombardment might still be resorted to, if it were considered that any advantage could thus be obtained.

The Committee are unable to concur in the recommendation of the provision of a "first-class torpedo-vessel," which would be very costly in maintenance, entail the creation of a permanent naval force, and be unsuited to colonial conditions.

The question of the defence of Port Darwin has been fully considered by the Colonial Defence Committee, who have pointed out that all present requirements will be met by the provision of a small defence for the landing-place of the cable. Port Darwin may eventually become a considerable commercial harbour, and might then claim protection on a moderate scale; but as a strategic point, it can never assume the importance of Torres Straits. Moreover, the cables from their geographical position are necessarily vulnerable, and must depend mainly for their defence on Her Majesty's navy, so that the protection of the shore ends is relatively of less moment than that of other cables which it would be difficult to injure except at the landing-places.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

The Colonial defence Committee have already recommended a scheme of defence for King George's Sound, which they consider will meet all present requirements.

As regards Fremantle, they have also recommended the provision of a small defence, the armament for which has been promised by Her Majesty's Government. Major-General Edwards considers that this defence is not at present necessary, and points out that "the battery which it is now proposed to construct might keep off an enemy's cruiser, but it would not be strong enough to prevent several such ships from attacking the town." The Colonial Defence Committee do not consider that a squadron attack is probable, and in keeping off a stray cruiser the work they have proposed would fulfil its requirements.

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 reports. While generally concurring in Major-General Edwards' 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 (1200 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 8000, in place of the 16,000 recommended, would amply suffice.

The Colonial Defence Committee purposely refrain from marking this memorandum as "confidential." Major-General Edwards' reports have been made public and widely discussed. They consider that their remarks, which refer to large questions of principle rather than to details of defence, should receive equal publicity.

G. S. CLARKE, *Secretary Colonial Defence Committee.*

May 16, 1890.