

A Critical Vulnerability: The Impact of the Submarine Threat on Australia's Maritime Defence 1915-1954

David Stevens

Reviewed by Richard Pelvin

Given the decline in Australian anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities over the last two decades, and recent acknowledgement that this has probably gone too far, *A Critical Vulnerability* provides most useful background to the original development and later dominance of ASW capabilities in the RAN.

Dr David Stevens is the Director of Strategic and Historical Studies at the Navy's think-tank, the Sea Power Centre – Australia. He is concerned that, despite Australia's ultimate economic dependence on seaborne trade, there has been little or no critical assessment of Australia's efforts at local maritime defence. He notes that while there have been studies of the RAN's campaigns and battles, and academic studies examining social and controversial issues, there is 'no study of the RAN that has yet drawn together the environmental limits that are increasingly considered fundamental to a functional understanding of modern navies'.

Although much defence thinking and debate for over a century has related to potential invasions of Australia, no enemy has seriously considered this. Yet in both world wars enemy forces threatened Australia's maritime trade, especially by submarine attack. The Australian experience of ASW was unique and at its height in World War II involved 'more than a third of the RAN's resources in men and tonnage, yet it has 'never received more than a cursory official study'. Moreover, Australia's response to the submarine was the first 'new capability that the RAN sought to introduce as an independent Service', distinct from its adoption of the traditional fleet and operational concepts of the Royal Navy.

Dr Stevens approaches his subject from a wide perspective, believing that naval policy and naval operations should be seen within a political, economic and technological framework and the constraints this places on naval planners. He describes how ASW challenged the RAN's intellectual development, combining as it does 'the integration of tactical, operational and strategic thought in a manner far in advance of any other area of naval warfare.' It also required integration of inter-Service doctrine and the co-ordination of scientific and industrial effort. The author notes that too little integration was achieved before 1945, demonstrating 'how difficult this was for a small defence force, and [providing] further insights into the domestic and international context of the times.'

ASW required specialised ships, weapons and sensors. Their operation required a high level of specialist training which had to be maintained or effectiveness declined. Shore establishments had to be built to give that training. Others were needed to develop and extend the scientific and technical expertise required to hunt an unseen vessel in three

dimensions. The idiosyncrasies of local waters had to be identified so that equipment could be used with maximum efficiency. Tactics had to be developed, refined and changed as submarine capabilities were extended, especially in the post-war era. The problems of routing and convoying of shipping had to be grappled with, as did the protection of harbours with physical barriers and detection devices. This complex infrastructure required the selection and training of sufficient men in a fleet with many competing requirements, and in a political environment which usually emphasised parsimony.

After outlining the first faltering steps taken during World War I, Dr Stevens describes the slow development of ASW expertise in the RAN during the inter-war period. The fledgling anti-submarine branch was not popular and had to compete for scarce resources with the rest of the fleet. Expansion was slow as specialist personnel and equipment (such as Asdic) were hard to come by and expert advice was often contradictory and slow in coming. Submarines were rarely available to use as targets during training and exercises. This vital requirement in training ASW personnel bedevilled the RAN until after World War II when a RN submarine squadron was based in Sydney until 1969. However, as the international strategic situation worsened in the 1930s, the ASW situation slowly improved as more and better equipment became available.

World War II brought rapid expansion of ASW capabilities. Dr Stevens describes the limited nature of early operations and outlines the development of the ASW force and the infrastructure that supported it. He highlights its strengths and weaknesses, especially the deficiencies in inter-Service co-operation caused by differing operational concepts. He provides an excellent critical overview of the Japanese submarine offensives of 1942 and 1943, including the political, economic and operational implications stemming from the introduction of convoying.

Finally, he tells how the lessons of World War II were absorbed and the steady development in ASW until, by 1954, it had become the dominant focus of RAN policy.

A Critical Vulnerability tackles the complexities and nuances of Australian ASW capabilities with insight and expertise. The reader is assisted by the author's clarity of expression, especially his ability to explain technical matters simply so they can be easily comprehended by the layman. The author's assessments of performance, while often critical, are well considered and balanced. The book is supported by many valuable charts and maps as well as ten useful appendices. *A Critical Vulnerability* is a most important addition to recording the RAN's history and is highly recommended. ♦

David Stevens, 'A Critical Vulnerability. The Impact of the Submarine Threat on Australia's Maritime Defence 1915-1954', Sea Power Centre – Australia, Canberra, 2005, Softback, 379pp., Complimentary copies available from the Centre at seapower.centre@defence.gov.au.

