The Ambon Forward Observation Line Strategy
1941-1942

A Lesson in Military Incompetence

By

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A dissertation submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at
Murdoch University
Declaration

Except where I have indicated, I declare that this dissertation is my own work and is an account of my research that has not been submitted for assessment for a degree at a University or other Tertiary Institution.

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David A Evans
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Abstract

In October 1940 and in February 1941, the Australian Chiefs of Staff agreed to supply a task force (Gull Force) and an air strike group to garrison the small Dutch Island of Ambon. The decision to send troops to support the Dutch was made at Singapore where Australia ostensibly agreed to send three squadrons of aircraft to support Ambon in exchange for the Dutch sending four of their squadrons to support Malaya and Singapore should they be attacked. Under closer examination, however, the reasons for sending Australian troops and aircraft to Ambon become more obscure.

Historians and writers in the past have provided various explanations for Australia’s commitment to Dutch Ambon as being; because the Island was a steppingstone for the Japanese to use in approaching Australia; because it was necessary to delay the Japanese for a couple of days; because Australia required a forward operating base; because Timor and Ambon were necessary for maintaining an open air route between Java and Australia; and, because Australia needed to demonstrate to its allies that it was prepared to fight the Japanese regardless of the disproportionate cost in doing so. Considering the paucity of facts regarding the Ambon case, the aim of this dissertation is to examine the question of why the Australian Government knowingly made the decision to send an under equipped, under-strength and unprotected task force to an isolated island in the Malukus to face overwhelming Japanese forces without any hope of reinforcement, rescue or withdrawal.

The conclusions show that the Australian Government and its military advisors were unequal to the task of successfully formulating grand war policy and military strategy in the Ambon Island case during 1941-1942. The minimum aim of war strategy is to formulate a decisive war plan in balance with the attainable political objective and the military’s ability to achieve those ends. The Ambon strategy failed these criterion where Gull Force was sent to garrison the Island without any stated aims other than fighting to hold the Japanese advance for no longer than a few days to demonstrate Australia’s willingness to fight. Gull Force was given an impossible task to fulfil at a price that could not be justified under any conventional strategic principles of the time.
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## Glossary of Terms

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<tr>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AACC</td>
<td>Australian Army Catering Corp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AASC</td>
<td>Australian Army Service Corp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABDA</td>
<td>America British Dutch Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABDACOM</td>
<td>America British Dutch Australia Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADS</td>
<td>Advanced Dressing Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHQ</td>
<td>Army Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIF</td>
<td>Australian Imperial Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bn</td>
<td>Battalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capt</td>
<td>Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>Chief of Air Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Commanding Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coy</td>
<td>Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CQMS</td>
<td>Company Quartermaster Sergeant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Det.</td>
<td>Detachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOC</td>
<td>General Officer Commanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSO</td>
<td>General Staff Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMG</td>
<td>Heavy Machine Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HQ</td>
<td>Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNIL</td>
<td>Dutch East Indies Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAD</td>
<td>Light Aid Detachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lt</td>
<td>Lieutenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lt-Col</td>
<td>Lieutenant Colonel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lt-Gen</td>
<td>Lieutenant General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMG</td>
<td>Light Machine Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj</td>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj-Gen</td>
<td>Major General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLKNIL</td>
<td>Dutch East Indies Army Air Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMG</td>
<td>Medium Machine Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEI</td>
<td>Netherlands East Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Officer Commanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl</td>
<td>Platoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prahau</td>
<td>Malay word for traditional boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAAF</td>
<td>Royal Australian Air Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAF</td>
<td>Royal Air Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAN</td>
<td>Royal Australian Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAP</td>
<td>Regimental Aid Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNLF</td>
<td>Special Naval Landing Force</td>
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Introduction

Ambon fell into Japanese hands on 3 February 1942. Since that time the battle of Ambon has remained, to a greater or lesser degree, obscured from mainstream Australian military history and consequently the consciousness of many contemporary Australians. Although this history is recorded in books such as Lionel Wigmore’s contribution to the official histories *Australia in the War of 1939-1945 - Volume IV*, Joan Beaumont’s *Gull Force: Survival and Leadership in Captivity 1941-1945*, Peter Henning’s *Doomed Battalion: Mateship and Leadership in War and Captivity, The Australian 2/40 Battalion 1940-1945*, Christopher Wray’s *Timor 1942: Australian Commandos at War with the Japanese* and Courtney Harrison’s *Ambon: Island of Mist*, little has been written in-depth about why Australia decided to send its troops to Ambon Island in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). This dissertation aims to examine the question of how the Australian military leaders came to make the decision of sending an ill-equipped task force of Australian troops to protect the small isolated Ambon garrison 933 kilometres north of Darwin.

The fact that the 2/21st Battalion (Gull Force) of the 23rd Brigade 8th Division was sent to Ambon following Japanese attacks on Malaya/Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Hawaii points to the importance that must have rested behind that decision at a time when Australia itself was threatened by Japan’s actions. This was especially the case when the 2/22nd Battalion (Sparrow Force) and the 2/40th Battalion (Lark Force) had also been dispersed to Timor and Rabaul respectively at a time when no other adequately trained forces remained to defend Australian shores with the resources then available. If no rational general would dissipate and isolate poorly armed forces miles
from supply, support or chance of rescue against overwhelming forces and without just
cause, why did Australia’s Chief of the General Staff dispose of the 2/21\textsuperscript{st} Battalion to
an isolated Dutch garrison at faraway Ambon Island?

In the official history, *The Japanese Thrust*, Wigmore explained that the task set for
Gull Force was based on the strategic importance of Ambon to Australia’s defence and
on a long-standing agreement with the Dutch. Ambon Island had a newly constructed
airfield at Laha on the Hitu Peninsular, which was of ostensible strategic importance to
both the Allies and the Japanese. Notwithstanding its importance, Wigmore explained
that the Australian Chiefs of Staff sent an inadequately resourced Gull Force to defend
the island.\textsuperscript{1} This raises the question, if Ambon was so important why was it reinforced
with such an inadequate task force? Wigmore’s chapter on *The Loss of Ambon* does not
reveal the answer to this question.

The nearest explanation Wigmore gave for the Australian Chiefs of Staff sending Gull
Force to Ambon stemmed from the Singapore Conferences. Notwithstanding Wigmore’s
examination of the 22-25 February Singapore Conference in his chapter *Plans and
Preparations*,\textsuperscript{2} in regards to Ambon he vaguely explained that Australian Chiefs of Staff
were anxious to establish air force bases as far north of Australia as was possible and
that an Australian infantry force was needed on the island to protect those RAAF assets.
Then in contradiction to the above, Wigmore went on to claim that General Vernon
Sturdee, Chief of the General Staff, had only reluctantly agreed to send a battalion

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., pp. 420-24.
group to Ambon and one battalion group each to Rabaul and Timor and that it was
initially done on the basis that the islands were ‘stepping-stones’ to Australia.\(^3\)

When Gull Force was finally confronted with the Japanese invasion at Ambon, the
Advisory War Council decided it would be too difficult to withdraw the battalion from
the garrison and that it remained imperative to delay the Japanese at the island for as
long as possible.\(^4\) Considering the supposed importance of Ambon to Australia’s higher
strategy, it seems enigmatic that Wigmore could not provide a more detailed explanation
regarding that strategy or explain the Chiefs of Staff’s provision of such a small
commitment to defend Ambon in the form of Gull Force, especially when Sturdee was
supposedly reluctant to send troops there in the first place. Rather than clarify the reason
for sending under-equipped troops to Ambon, it seems Wigmore only served to confuse
the issue; either Ambon was important or it was not.

Beaumont also skipped over the question of why inadequate Australian forces were sent
to Ambon in the face of overwhelming forces. The reason for this was perhaps that her
thesis was directed more to the question of why some Gull Force men survived the
stresses of Japanese internment where others did not. Beaumont’s explanation for the
disposal of Gull Force to Ambon was simply that the island was strategically important
to Australia and that Australia had committed itself to defending the Netherlands East
Indies against Japanese attack.\(^5\) This brief explanation is no clearer than Wigmore’s

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 69, 76.
\(^4\) National Archives of Australia, Advisory War Council Minutes (Original Set) Chronological Series,
A5954, 812/1 to 815/2, 29 October 1940 to 30 August 1945, Meetings 16 Dec to Mar 1942. Minute No
724.
above. Nevertheless, Beaumont noted that only a large well-equipped force could
defend Ambon and that Gull Force was under equipped and therefore unlikely to have
been able to defend the island.\textsuperscript{6} This observation only lent support to the question of
why, when Ambon was so strategically important, did the Chiefs of Staffs knowingly
send such a small ill-quipped battalion to defend the island against an expected
overwhelming Japanese attack.

Henning, on the other hand, seems to come closest to explaining the dispersal of the
23\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade to the islands. He explained that the strategy of sending Australian troops
to the islands was derived from the British led Singapore conferences, where Malaya
Command was required to examine the Japanese threat to the Far East and especially
Malaya and Singapore. Here, he made it clear the conferences had decided that, without
a fleet to protect Singapore, a modern air force was required to deter the Japanese from
attacking the island even though few modern aircraft were available for Far East
deployment.

Henning explained that, in the context of those meetings and where Australia was
relying on Britain’s inadequate defence of Singapore, the Australian Chiefs of Staff had
agreed to send air forces to the islands north of Australia such as Rabaul, Timor and
Ambon. To protect the air force assets on the islands the Australian Chiefs of Staff had
decided that two battalion groups should be dispersed to garrison the island airfields.
According to Henning, the Australian War Cabinet accepted the Chiefs of Staff’s
recommendations to garrison the islands on 14 February 1941 and committed one

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 35.
battalion group each to Ambon and Timor along with an air striking force that was earmarked for operations over these islands from Darwin. Although Henning provided a little more detail to the question, the reasons behind sending Gull and Sparrow Forces to the islands still remain obscure.

Wray also came no closer to explaining why under equipped forces were sent to defend such strategically important outposts as Timor and Ambon. He explained that the Singapore Conference had found it was in a position where it had too few aircraft even with the addition of those held by the NEI Government. Wray provided no in-depth analysis on why the Australian chiefs of staff had decided to send the under equipped troops to the islands and particularly in his case to Timor.

Although Harrison was a member of Gull Force and experienced the privations of captivity, he refrained from commenting on whether Sturdee had made the right decision or not in sacrificing Gull Force. In his book *Ambon: Island of Mist - 2/21st Battalion AIF (Gull Force) Prisoners of War 1941-45* Harrison stated that:

It was a well kept secret that the future plans for their ultimate destination had been established because of a long standing agreement by Australia with the Netherlands Government should Japan enter the war and, when this did eventuate, Gull Force moved to Ambon a small island N/W of Darwin and a comparable distance from Melbourne to Sydney. Together with a regiment of poorly trained native troops led by Dutch officers, they were given the impossible task of defending it against a Division of experienced well trained enemy with modern arms and equipment, aided by Naval ships and carrier-born [sic] aircraft which made the result never in doubt. As to the correctness or otherwise of the conception of Australian troops being sacrificed in such circumstances, I refrain from comment with the understanding that any war means sacrifice.

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The problem with Harrison’s failure to comment on the sacrifice of Gull Force is that he, for whatever reason, has served only to obscure whether the Australian Government was justified in that sacrifice in the wider context of the war.

A better explanation for Australian participation in occupying the garrisons at Ambon and Timor comes from Jack Ford in his book *Allies in a Bind: Australia and the Netherlands East Indies in the Second World War*. Ford revealed in more detail how the agreement between the Australians and the Dutch was made at the Singapore Conference of 22-25 February 1941. According to Ford, the Dutch committed to transferring three Glen Martin squadrons and one Buffalo squadron (24 aircraft) to Singapore at the outbreak of war with Japan in exchange for a similar commitment from the Australians for three squadrons to operate over Ambon and Timor. It was suggested that the Australians garrison Ambon because it was an important link between Australia and Java.10 However, Ford failed to clarify why, if Ambon was so strategically important, did Australia commit to protecting the airfield at Ambon with only one under equipped battalion.

In *The Supplement to The London Gazette* in January 1948 Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, the architect of the mutual air defence scheme at Singapore, gave his account of the Singapore Conferences and Australia’s commitment to Malaya Command’s principle of mutual air support in the Far East. As part of this agreement the Dutch promised to provide one fighter and three bomber squadrons in the defence of Malaya should it be attacked in exchange for a similar British commitment in the NEI.

Under this agreement Australia promised to provide Army units and an air striking force to Ambon and Kupang at Timor. This was agreed to on the basis that a Japanese attack on one would be an attack on all. As the Australian Chiefs of Staff were left with the planning of the sending of reinforcements to Ambon and Kupang, Brooke-Popham was unable to report further on the outcome of Australia’s commitment to the mutual support scheme in the Far East, leaving it for the Australians to report.  

It seems counterintuitive that the Australian Government would send an under equipped inadequate force to face overwhelming forces only to protect such a strategically important island, as Ambon was described, without any hope of holding the island and at a time when Australia needed all the military resources it could retain on the mainland. The answer to this question must lie with Australia’s Chiefs of Staff, the high strategists in Australia at the entry into the Second World War. Accordingly, to find the answer to the above question, this dissertation will focus on the Chiefs of Staff and the records they have left behind.

The first chapter of this dissertation, *Ambon: Grand Strategy and the Anglo-Dutch-Australia Mutual Air Defence Scheme*, examines in detail the proposals that were settled upon at the Singapore conferences of October 1940 to February 1941. During this period Australia initially agreed to provide the Dutch garrison of Ambon with an air striking force and a brigade of infantry as part of its commitment to the mutual air

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defence scheme along the Malay Barrier. It was on this basis that the Chiefs of Staff formalized their strategy to defend not only Ambon but Timor and Rabaul also.

Chapter Two, *Ambon: The Position and Line Holding Strategy*, in the context of Carl von Clausewitz’s book *On War*, examines Roach’s questioning of the Chiefs of Staff’s strategy of retaining Gull Force at Ambon to face overwhelming forces for no gain other than a few days delay to the Japanese advance. This chapter demonstrates how Roach exposed the weaknesses intrinsic to the Chiefs of Staff Operation Instruction No. 15, under which Gull Force was required to operate. The reader is also made aware of the circumstances surrounding the dismissal of Roach and his replacement with Lieutenant Colonel John Scott, while exposing the reason why the Chiefs of Staff disposed of Gull Force against such insurmountable odds.

Both Chapters Three, *The Japanese Grand Strategy, Strategy and Tactics on Ambon*, and Four, *The Australian Story*, are presented to juxtapose the Japanese offensive with that of the Dutch and Australian defence of Ambon. The stark difference in approach to Japanese and Allied strategies is used to reveal the commitment, or lack there of, of the respective combatants to the strategic importance of Ambon. The description of the Japanese attack is taken from Japanese as well as Australian accounts of the battles. The description of the Australian story is taken from various Australian archival sources.

The final chapter, *Incompetence in Command*, demonstrates General Sturdee’s lack of competence as Chief of the General Staff and self appointed nominal Commander-in-
Chief and architect of the Australian commitment to the Malay Barrier strategy, which later became known as the Forward Observation Line strategy. It will be argued that Sturdee was incompetent for sending Gull, Sparrow and Lark Forces as isolated penny packet garrisons lacking the means to carry out their duties to defend the islands of Ambon, Timor and Rabaul during 1941-1942.