



Industry Outreach Strategy: The Applied History Laboratory

In April 2023, the Albanese government released the public version of the [Defence Strategic Review](#), undertaken to ensure that Defence has “the right capabilities” (p.12) to meet the varied strategic challenges facing Australia and its partner countries over the next ten years. In outlining its agenda for reform, the Review explicitly stated that, “for the first time in 80 years, [Defence] must go back to fundamentals” (p.17) in the efforts to address and manage national security risks.

This explicit acknowledgement of the need to look to the past to shape the future speaks directly to the central role of history in conceptualising and managing national security. We prepare for the future by studying the past; it is the largest dataset we have. While history and its aligned disciplines at UNSW Canberra already contribute to discussions about how Australia might meet its strategic challenges, drawing upon the combined expertise of **The Applied History Laboratory** offers a unique opportunity for Defence to contextualise and thus better understand their current and future challenges.

Drawing on the STEM model of research data production to produce directed and impactful research outcomes, **The Applied History Laboratory** produces archival and other historical data from which experts can supply research and recommendations to respond directly to Defence’s needs, to meet its aim of linking high-quality research with Defence and other government stakeholders.

The following summarises the first set of research papers produced under this model for the Army Research Centre addressing their requirement to contextualise the challenges facing the Australian Army as it pivots towards littoral warfare in the wake of the DSR. The full papers can be found in the Australian Army Journal - <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/australian-army-journal-aaaj/volume-19-number-2>

Richard Dunley, “Theoretical and Historical Groundings of Joint Operations for Sea Control”

States seeking to control the sea and use it for their own purposes have rarely considered using land power to do so. Traditional maritime strategy disapproves of this approach: the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan deemed it antithetical to the proper use of sea power. Why, then, has Australia’s 2023 Review called for joint forces in littoral environments to provide effects in the maritime domain?

In this paper, Dunley locates this approach to expeditionary warfare within the framework of traditional maritime strategy, suggesting the application of an historical and theoretical lens through which to understand these strategic developments. The conflation of land-based power projection with sea denial overlooks Australia’s being an island continent, located in a region equally dependent upon the sea. Australian efforts to utilise land power to influence actions at sea must therefore be focused on working with the navy and air force to achieve both sea denial *and* sea control, where appropriate.

In analysing the Mediterranean and South West Pacific theatres in World War Two, and revealing that sea control was essential to both Allied and Axis forces’ campaigns, Dunley demonstrates that land-based power projection does not only have to be conceptualised through the framework of A2/AD, and that the use of the littoral zone for sea control is not new. But while others have emphasised the importance of technological developments for sea control, it is *strategy* that is the more powerful catalyst for Australia’s renewed interest in littoral warfare: namely, a growing Chinese navy and its attempts to establish sea control in the region. Dunley’s historical and theoretical contextualisation thus enables a better understanding of the operational and strategic purposes for this renewed emphasis on the littoral zone.

Rhys Crawley, “Supplies over the Shore: Logistics and Australian Littoral Operations”

Australia’s emphasis on the littoral in the 2023 Review means that logistic knowledge needs to be strengthened across Defence. Logistics over the shore is, alongside establishing and securing a point of entry, a primary challenge that littoral and amphibious operations face. But turning to the past reminds us that these challenges are not new. In World War One, unlike the Allies’ logistical and amphibious success in German New Guinea, the Gallipoli campaign suffered from a complete lack of consideration for logistics, which Crawley argues was an inherent failure of the campaign’s design: although not the reason for the Allies’ failure, it meant that the international Mediterranean Expeditionary Force did not have all it needed for success to be possible. But unlike the USA and Britain, Australia did not heed the lessons from Gallipoli’s logistical failures. In World War Two, then, Australian efforts at Lae, New Guinea, revealed them to be adept in amphibious assault but weak logistically, needing structural change and specialised training. By 1945, when Australians successfully liberated Borneo, the lessons of past failures had been learned: logistics underpinned the operation from the outset. The Allied air, sea, and land forces were each logistically proficient, in turn bolstering the capacity for resupply and reinforcements.

Thomas Richardson, “Small Boats and Brave Men: The 9th Division and the Use of the Littoral in the Huon Peninsula Campaign, September 1943—January 1994”

Part of the larger Operation Cartwheel, which aimed to isolate the Japanese base at Rabaul, New Guinea, the Huon Peninsula Campaign saw General MacArthur’s South-West Pacific Area push the Japanese north from Lae to Sio, in turn advancing up the New Guinea coast. Informed by the preceding Operation Postern, which revealed that the persistent presence of landing craft could enhance troops’ ability to generate power in a littoral area, Richardson argues that in the four-month-long Huon Peninsula Campaign, both the Allies and the Japanese understood the value of exploiting the littoral zone to their advantage. It was ultimately the former who would prove successful, thanks to several specific factors. First, the availability of the 532nd Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment enabled tanks and artillery to provide overwhelming fire superiority, something the Japanese considered a major reason for their defeat. Second, the 9th Division mobilised the small, inexpensive, and unsophisticated craft of Task Group 70.1 to great effect, moving guns and tanks quickly from base areas to (larger than smaller) beachheads, unlocking a range of combat power. Third, the air and sea powers of the Allies not only used the littoral for their own offensive means but also denied it to the Japanese, weakening their already fragile logistics and thus accelerating their eventual collapse.

William Westerman, “Entry by Air and Sea: The Littoral Challenges of Operation Astute, 2006”

In 1999, Australia led an international force to address the humanitarian and security crisis taking place in Timor-Leste. Seven years later, Australia returned to its northern neighbour as part of Operation Astute, an intervention to quell growing political unrest that had escalated into general violence throughout the country. Their previous experience showed the Australians that they lacked the experience and capability to deploy a sizable force overseas, even to a close neighbour like Timor-Leste, whether by sea, air, or both. The legacy of 9/11 and Defence’s multiple commitments across the globe meant that Astute unfolded in a vastly different operational context than did the previous intervention. Yet the lodgement and force build-up phases were ultimately successful, given that Australian air and sea assets were able to deploy land forces on the ground less than 48 hours after receiving the request for assistance. While this success is thanks to a shared trust across the joint elements to have mastery over their respective domain, and 3rd Brigade Commander Slater’s access to joint assets (notably the Amphibious Task Force Group), Westerman notes as well that favourable circumstances, and the lack of serious opposition in contesting the lodgement, also made Astute a success.