Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming along.

I'm hoping that some of you might have been interested to note that from the title of today's seminar Australia actually had a maritime strategy before World War II, but I wasn't quite sure how many people would be inclined to front up today after Anzac Day. I think it is appropriate to have a seminar on this particular topic because, after everything we might have heard, read and seen yesterday, we'd be excused for believing that the story of defence development in Australia from the time of Federation has been an Army-dominated narrative geared to Australian soldiers sailing off to help defend the British Empire in time of need.

My aim this afternoon is to demonstrate that there was, in fact, a maritime strategy in play in Australia before and more particularly after World War I, and that this significantly involved the RAAF. I'll go a bit further, and be even more contentious, and suggest that this maritime strategy was the dominant strategic imperative and driver in that same period.

It may be difficult to envisage that governments in the infancy of the Commonwealth period gave much thought to fundamental issues involving matters of defence or foreign policy, since these were still areas very much dominated by the authorities in London. Admittedly, we also had very little in the way of structure and mechanism in our early Defence Department organisation for independent strategic thinking. Nonetheless, when we look back at what our politicians were saying and writing, it will be found that they were expressing points of view which effectively represented the genesis of local policy, including in the defence arena. Importantly, this process was in evidence in Australia from colonial times.

From the late nineteenth century the Royal Navy had been viewed as the first line of defence for Australian territory and also our maritime trade. From September 1891 there was a second line of naval defence, in the form of an auxiliary squadron comprising third-rate cruisers and torpedo gunboats that the Royal Navy maintained on its Australia
Station under an 1887 naval agreement between Britain and the Australian colonies and New Zealand. This squadron was paid for in part by a subsidy from the colonies, and it was expressly stated that its ships could not be sent off the Australia Station without the consent of colonial governments. There was a third line of naval defence, comprising the small vessels that several of the colonies maintained essentially for protecting ports and harbours.

Those naval arrangements from the colonial period continued to have priority into the first years of the Commonwealth. In fact, it was a bill to extend and revise the naval subsidy scheme that gave rise to the first great debate on the floor of the new Federal Parliament in mid-1903. For the next six years the really big defence issue in Australia was when a local navy would be acquired, and what sort of force it should be. Most Australian advocates, from Captain William Creswell—the 'Father of the Royal Australian Navy'—down, were thinking about the need for a coastal defence force. In the event, however, when the British Admiralty finally caved in to dominion calls at the 1909 Imperial Conference to allow local navies, it did so by approving the formation of what were to be regarded as ‘fleets units’ of the Royal Navy. As this was a proposal more attuned to meeting Imperial defence objectives, it could be argued that Australian defence had been diverted from its true purpose. However, none of this alters our understanding of what lay behind the purpose of successive Australian Governments in pushing for a viable scheme of naval defence in the lead up to World War I.

That Australia was effectively subscribing to a greater British maritime strategy can be demonstrated by some facts and figures from the first decade after Federation. While the Commonwealth Military Forces grew from only 29,000 men across the whole of Australia at the end of 1901 to 45,000 on the eve of World War I, it was overwhelmingly a militia army. Only a very small cadre—fewer than 1500 men in 1901—were permanent full-time personnel, the majority of these being either administrative or instructional staff, or members of the artillery units that manned the fixed fortifications at principal ports. While the total number of troops, including regulars, virtually doubled by World War I, the basis of this expanded force was a conscripted National Guard. That the purpose of this army lay, first and foremost, in the realms of local defence was further emphasised in the way it was organised, with no field formations larger than a brigade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Permanent</th>
<th>Militia</th>
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<th>Total</th>
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<td>2407</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>1 544</strong></td>
<td><strong>16 105</strong></td>
<td><strong>11 361</strong></td>
<td><strong>29 010</strong></td>
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**Table: Strength of the Australian Army by State, 1901**

In the same period 1901 to 1914, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) went from a handful of very old and obsolete vessels, totalling only about 5300 tons and 200 permanent personnel, to 16 large modern warships totalling 45,300 tons manned by a full-time establishment of 3500 personnel. Whereas in 1901 the Federal Government was spending almost £600,000 on the military forces, the naval forces were getting only 30 per cent of that amount. By 1914, though, the allocations were nearly two million pounds for the Royal Australian Navy and 1.5 million for the whole of the Commonwealth Military Forces. The Navy was now the most professional element of Australia’s defence force, and it was receiving the largest slice of the budgetary pie.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Vessels</th>
<th>Total Tonnage</th>
<th>Permanent Personnel</th>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5300</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5300</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>16 commissioned</td>
<td>45 342</td>
<td>3730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 building</td>
<td>14 246</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>37 (one building)</td>
<td>89 735</td>
<td>5263 (end 1918)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table: Growth of the Royal Australian Navy, 1901–20**
It was precisely because Australia’s military forces were structured for home defence that during World War I Australia recruited a volunteer mass army, enlisting 417,000 young men in an expeditionary force for overseas service. When the Australian Imperial Force returned in 1919, its members were mostly demobilised and national defence reverted to the trend seen before 1914. Even with postwar cutbacks, the spending on military forces in 1919–22 was only half that of the RAN. In fact, Navy consistently received greater funding than the Army right up to 1939—often more than double, and in 1926–27 it was treble the amount spent on Army.

The Washington Conference on naval limitations in 1921–22 certainly caused some cutbacks in the size of our Navy. For example, the flagship, HMAS Australia, was disposed of under the terms of the Washington Naval Treaty. (Actually, our Navy people didn’t mind too much about that, because the battle cruiser had become pretty much a ‘white elephant’ by that stage. The Royal Navy no longer even made the 12-inch ammunition that the ship needed, so the RAN was quite happy to see it go.) Even with that disposal, and the retirement of other vessels, the RAN was left with over 3000 permanent personnel while the Army only had 1600.

At the same time that Australia was decommissioned and scuttled, the Government gave commitment in 1924 to acquire two new heavy cruisers, two submarines and a 6000-ton seaplane tender. This followed the 1923 Imperial Conference at which Britain announced plans to develop a naval base at Singapore which was intended as the fixed guarantor of a Royal Navy presence in the Pacific. The point is that Australia fully subscribed to the Singapore strategy, just as it did with British maritime strategies in earlier times, and it dominated Australian defence planning well into the start of World War II. In fact, in 1940 the Australian Government committed ground troops and four RAAF squadrons to help garrison the Singapore base.

On all the available evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the only strategy that successive Australian Governments consistently embraced was a maritime one. This required the RAN to take the lead in developing a local capacity to dominate our coastal waters, along with the nearer part of the international sea lanes important for our trade. While this strategy did not address many of the activities which we would now regard as implicit to maritime security, such as piracy, illegal immigration, smuggling and poaching, this was largely because such concerns—apart from encroachment by foreign fishing vessels—were largely absent in the period. What can be observed was a broad interest in gaining familiarity with Australia’s maritime environment, and developing the capacity to operate within it for the purpose of exerting control over our sea surrounds.

What part in this came to be played by the RAAF after it entered on the defence scene in 1921? The role was largely mandated at the time of its formation, because it was laid down in December 1920 that the air service then being proposed would have to retain a portion of its organisation specifically to cooperate with the naval forces, along with a portion to work with the military forces. This requirement was undoubtedly a reflection of what had been a bitter struggle from late in the war, during which Navy and Army both tried to win government agreement for their own separate schemes to develop postwar air services that met their specific wants. But in 1919 the Government gave its decision that Australia would have one Air Force, just as the United Kingdom had done with the formation of the
RAF in 1918, and that this new Service would meet the needs of both the others.

Under the initial plan of organisation for the RAAF, two of the six first squadrons that were going to be raised were intended for sea duty—No 5 equipped with float planes, and No 6 with flying boats. Unfortunately a serious problem emerged early on, arising from the fact that no sea planes were among the types selected by the Australian Government’s aviation advisers in London (who were all mainly Army officers) at the time that an Imperial Gift of aircraft was being settled. In 1919 the British Government had offered up to 100 aircraft to any of the Dominions who wanted to form an air force. This was an offer taken up by Australia, along with Canada and New Zealand (though the latter took a much smaller number), and during 1920 we duly received our ‘Imperial Gift’ of 100 war surplus aircraft, along with all the supporting equipment necessary to make an air force a viable entity.

The problem was that the Imperial Gift comprised only bombers and fighters, plus some trainers. None of these aircraft were really suitable for operations over water, a fact that was very quickly demonstrated in September 1920 after a coal schooner went missing on a voyage from Newcastle to Hobart. The Government directed that two of the new DH9 bombers, just received, be sent off from Point Cook to help look for the missing vessel in Bass Strait and down the east coast of Tasmania. One of these aircraft also went missing, along with its two-man crew, and was never seen again.

At least the Naval Board had foreseen this sort of problem. In July 1920 the purchase of six Fairey IIID float planes from England was approved, and when these duly arrived in November 1921 they were handed over to the RAAF to operate. As events transpired, these became the only aircraft in Australia that were suitable for naval cooperation work. Cuts to the RAAF development plan that occurred in its second year meant the planned flying boats to equip No 6 Squadron were never acquired, even though an area of 116 acres at North Geelong (on the foreshore of Corio Bay) had been acquired in 1922 for the new unit’s base.

It was also soon found that the Fairey IIID did not really meet Navy’s requirements, because it was too big and heavy for carriage in RAN ships. Trials were conducted from early in 1924 which involved sending one of these aircraft up north to work with Navy’s survey sloops engaged in preliminary work to chart islands and shoals of the Great Barrier Reef. But it was discovered that putting an aircraft the size of the Fairey IIID on a sloop created issues of stability which placed the ship at serious risk if it ventured outside the sheltered waters inside the Reef.
The Fairey IIID was useful for surveying air routes along the south-east coast and across Bass Strait to Tasmania. It was also quite spectacularly used for the 1924 round-Australia flight by Goble and McIntyre, which was probably a useful contribution to developing a maritime strategy in as much as it helped extend knowledge of the operating environment across our northern coastline at a time when practically nothing was known about this region. These aircraft also made quite a splash when they succeeded in detecting the US Pacific Fleet as it was approaching the New South Wales south coast for a visit in 1925. Two aircraft took off in weather that was so bad that the American cruisers were unable to launch the aircraft which they themselves carried, yet the RAAF Fairey IIIDs managed to find the American ships and signal them to let them know that they’d been detected. While there was obviously an element of luck on this occasion, the RAAF achievement was also a tribute to the skill and dedication of the aircrew.

The unsatisfactory situation that the RAAF faced with these aircraft was quickly recognised and addressed, which at least indicated that the Air Board took seriously its obligation to work with Navy. In April 1925 six new Seagull III amphibious flying boats were ordered from England. When these arrived the following year, they were formed into No 101 (Fleet Co-operation) Flight in July and sent north to start work on a formal program to survey the Great Barrier Reef. Unfortunately, the Seagulls were not much superior to the Fairey IIID either in dimensions or performance, but they were certainly better suited to survey work which was the primary requirement.

The suitability of the Seagull III suddenly became an issue, because it was in 1924 that the Government announced plans to build the seaplane tender for the RAN, mentioned earlier. The RAAF was very much surprised to learn the following year that it was expected to provide the aircraft and crews to put in this vessel once it entered service. There was no discussion with the RAAF; apparently the Air Board was suddenly advised that it would be required to supply the aircraft. When the tender was duly commissioned as HMAS Albatross in January 1929, the Seagull III remained the only type of aircraft that the RAAF had available for that role—there was nothing else immediately available from the UK.

At the end of 1928, 101 Flight was withdrawn from Queensland in preparation for embarkation in the new seaplane tender. RAAF detachments of generally six pilots and aircrew, plus a technical support team of about 25 airmen, became a constant feature of Albatross crewing right up until 1933, when the ship was paid off as an economy measure during the Depression. It was a tribute to all involved, both Navy and Air Force, that protocols were developed and put in place that enabled the RAN and the RAAF to operate in a joint environment effectively and harmoniously.
The arrangement achieved what it was meant to do, in that it provided the RAN with the capacity for reconnaissance at sea and other specialist support for naval operations. Over the four years in which *Albatross* served in the RAN, a regular pattern emerged which saw the RAAF participate in the Navy’s annual program of training cruises to various Australian States, up into the northern islands, and across as far as New Zealand. These cruises were designed to extend the knowledge of Australia’s maritime environment and also exercised the ability of Navy and the RAAF to operate within that environment.

Two Seagull IIIs being hoisted into *Albatross*

Seagulls were also used for other notable activities of relevance to the idea of pursuing a maritime strategy. In 1927 two of these aircraft were used to fly what was termed an oil survey around the coast of the Australian-administered territories of Papua and New Guinea. Considering that in 1926 the Chief of the Air Staff had made a great show of taking a DH50 floatplane out as far as the Solomon Islands, as a ‘show the flag’ exercise and to learn something about the island environment that might be of relevance to Australia’s capacity to operate in that area, the case can be argued that there were other benefits for the Air Force in undertaking that sort of mission at that time.

It was also notable that, because the Seagull III had been identified early on as unsuitable for the sort of work that Navy was expecting of it, Wing Commander Lawrence Wackett at the RAAF Experimental Section in Randwick, Sydney, was inspired to attempt to design a replacement. The *Widgeon II*, as he called it, was completed in December 1927, and was specifically intended to be a float plane for use by Navy. (Incidentally, there was a *Widgeon I*, also a flying boat, but it was built for the Civil Aviation Branch.) The only notable moment for *Widgeon II* came in late 1928, just three or four months after it was completed, when it was used to fly up to Darwin and then across Broome, Western Australia, with the objective of meeting up with a special flight of RAF Southampton flying boats which were making a tour of Australia from Singapore, to see how suitable these big aircraft were for Australian flying conditions.
The RAAF, by the way, had just bought two of these same Southampton flying boats—only with wooden hulls, not the metal hulls that the RAF were operating. When these acquisitions arrived in January 1928, a couple of months before Wackett’s flight, they were formed into a long-range coastal patrol flight dubbed ‘Seaplane Squadron’, based at Point Cook.

Point Cook personnel in front of giant Southampton flying boat

With the Albatross paying off into reserve, the Naval Board arranged for single RAAF Seagulls, together with detachments of both airmen and support staff, to embark in the new County Class heavy cruisers Australia and Canberra. The rest of 101 Flight’s aircraft, when not required to deploy, operated from the RAAF base at Richmond, which at least placed them handy to Navy’s fleet base in Sydney Harbour. This became the principal form of naval cooperation carried out by the RAAF at sea right up until World War II. There were, however, other measures underway at this time.

Southampton taking off with two Seagull IIIs

There was another big step undertaken to find better aircraft for naval use. The search had actually begun once the unsuitability of the Seagull III was first realised. The RAAF issued specifications for a purpose-designed aircraft, but could find no manufacturer then interested in meeting the challenge. All this changed in 1929–30, when the Vickers Company in the United Kingdom came up with the Seagull V, which was a boat amphibian designed for catapulting off cruisers. The RAAF placed a formal order in January 1934 and by 1935 the first of this type was received, enabling the carriage of aircraft to be extended to the RAN’s light cruisers, as well, from 1936.

Seagull III (A9-2) stowed in starboard waist of HMAS Australia during Spring cruise, 1932

Seagull V aircraft of No 5 Squadron on show during RAAF display at Richmond, April 1938
Walrus embarked in HMAS Australia in pre-war colours

Seagull V launched from RAN cruiser c.1936

The story behind the Seagull V (or what came to be known in the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force as the ‘Walrus’) is actually quite an interesting one. As mentioned, the aircraft was designed specifically to meet a RAAF requirement, but once available for evaluation the type proved so successful that the British immediately ordered it for their own use. In fact, hundreds of these aircraft were built, and remained around in both navies throughout the war years and beyond. The development of the Walrus was probably the clearest illustration that the RAAF was serious about its naval support role.

Some of the accounts that Sir Richard Williams, the Chief of the Air Staff in this inter-war period, has left behind make it clear that he was the principal figure behind the issuing of the specification for this type of aircraft. As early as 1926 he had been working with the RAAF Director of Technical Services, having realised that Air Force had a big problem on its hands if the naval cooperation role the Government expected the Service to fulfil was going to be met. Williams gave specific warnings to the Minister of Defence in May 1930 about the deplorable state of the RAAF’s naval cooperation element in Albatross. He said it was operating with obsolete equipment and had no reserves, or any replacements for aircraft when these were lost or damaged at sea. He could not even get money for RAAF rescue boats. Williams was bluntly warning the Government that it had the makings of a disaster on its hands.

Once the RAAF received the Seagull V, it reformed 101 Flight into a fully fledged squadron in April 1936. Initially called No 5 (Fleet Co-operation) Squadron, the unit was renamed No 9 Squadron on the eve of World War II. This was the main means by which the RAAF met its obligations to provide air support for Navy at sea, but it was not the only RAAF element involved in cooperation with RAN ships. There were many other squadrons that became involved from time to time in providing aircraft for patrol and bombing exercises. For example, No 1 Squadron took part in one exercise off the Victorian coast in October 1933. In February 1937, No 3 Squadron (which was actually designated as an Army Co-operation unit) sent aircraft down to Jervis Bay to cooperate with the fleet. And in April 1939 there followed Exercise N.Z.3—the largest sea exercise held in Australia up to that point. Conceived as a strategic maritime trade protection exercise, this was also the first Australian joint exercise in that most of the Australian fleet was involved, along with a number of merchant vessels as well, along with visiting warships from the Royal New Zealand Navy, and something like 45 aircraft from the RAAF. The involvement of so many land-based elements of the RAAF only emphasised that pursuit of Australia’s maritime strategy was never regarded as the sole responsibility of Navy alone.
In fact, RAAF commitment to the maritime role is evident across the Service, especially during the expansion phase undertaken during the rearmament period leading up to World War II. A number of new aircraft types that were being acquired were especially adding capabilities for coastal reconnaissance and patrol, even though some (like the Avro Anson) were quickly recognised as obsolescent. The Anson was a type that RAF Coastal Command was bringing into service in Britain in large numbers, expressly to provide coastal support. While the early naval aircraft types in Australia—the Fairey IIID and the Seagull III—were purely spotter aircraft, the newer types now had some combat capacity. The Seagull V could carry both bombs and depth charges, as indeed could the Anson, so for the first time the RAAF could contemplate dealing with threats that emerged in Australia’s sea lanes off the coast.

In this period, too, Australia was also looking at acquiring Sunderland flying boats and creating a new capability with a new unit, No 10 Squadron. The RAAF was also getting the Bristol Beaufort bomber, ordered late in 1938, which again had utility for coastal reconnaissance and provided greater capacity for finding out what might be happening in Australia’s maritime environment. These were the main types the RAAF went to war with in September 1939, or formed its principal equipment during the first years of the war. Other significant types were already in the pipeline, for example the Consolidated PBY5 Catalina which entered RAAF service in 1940, so the capacity to operate at sea and operate in a maritime environment was constantly evolving at this time.

In the *Pathfinder* just published this month it is mentioned that all of this had a fairly direct result on the early operational history of the RAN during the war, because whenever one of our cruisers got involved in a scrape, invariably the RAAF was involved as well. For example, when HMAS *Australia* went into action against Dakar in West Africa in September 1940, its Walrus was shot down by Vichy French fighters. When HMAS *Sydney* was sunk in a clash with the German raider *Kormoran* in November 1941, it took down with it a RAAF detachment and its Walrus flying boat. The same thing happened when *Perth* encountered a Japanese invasion force in the Sunda Strait in March 1942; the ship’s Walrus was lost and most of the RAAF detachment were either fatalities or became prisoners of war with the Japanese. When *Canberra* went down in the battle of Savo Island in August 42, it lost its RAAF crew as well.

So the arrangement that existed in the inter-war period certainly found its best expression in the record of the RAAF working with the Navy at sea during the war. All the measures described give a clear idea that the RAAF understood the special circumstances of Australia’s maritime environment and the needs which that generated for the nation’s defence, even before World War II brought war into the Pacific. The manner in which the RAAF responded, within the limits that government funding priorities allowed, make it reasonable to say that the RAAF was prepared to shoulder its responsibilities in furthering the nation’s strategic maritime priorities to an extent that that went beyond mere lip-service.