

Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, AO, CSC, RAN

2013 King Hall History Conference

Opening Address

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be able to open the 2013 King-Hall Naval Conference on 'The War at Sea, 1914-18.'

It is, I think, a common mistake to imagine the times we are currently living through are without precedent in the quantity, magnitude or rate of changes we experience.

To be sure, there are many changes but where I think we can easily go wrong is to imagine that no other period in history experienced similarly disruptive changes – that of course would be to succumb to the parochialism of the present, something that we do pretty well most days but something we must continually guard against.

The period leading up to the Great War at Sea was full of technological, political and social changes. Just looking at the technological changes relevant to navies shows how extensive that change was: turbines were in the process of replacing reciprocating engines, which had not yet completely eclipsed sailing ships; gyros were being incorporated into torpedoes; wireless communications were being introduced for tactical and strategic communications; early analogue computers were being developed to solve fire control problems; and submarines and aircraft with militarily significant capabilities were entering service.

As with all change, it seems to me the technology changed faster than people. Dare I say it, but the Admirals in charge of the steel ships first learnt their craft with oak and canvas. I do not think they were

necessarily ill-equipped, but, if the scholarship of Andrew Gordon has anything to teach us, it is that there was a lot of change to assimilate.

The technology, the events, the societal changes, the people – all of these areas are of course enduringly fascinating.

I think much of what we would regard and recognise as marking the modern era came to fruition or reached critical mass around this time. So, although we are obviously looking at the history of the Great War at Sea because of the impending centenary, I am sure you would agree there is ongoing value in studying and understanding this particular part of history for these other aspects of the period.

Indeed, as we look to the development of Australia's maritime strategy and to a Maritime School of Strategic Thought, I think it is notable that so many of the issues we face now were faced in the period leading up to and during the First World War.

The maritime defence of Australia has been both a challenge and a priority throughout Australia's history. Despite our strategic geography, articulating it has been an equal challenge: the fundamental importance of maritime trade to national prosperity; the distance from our shores at which our interests might be threatened; the length of our coastline and the extent of our maritime estate; the impact of technological advances on force structure; the cost of providing for Australia's national defence; and the stability of our region; our engagement with allies, partners and neighbours. All of these things were being argued over a century ago as our fledgling Navy came into being.

Just over a century ago our strategic discussion, which at that time was in many ways trying to shake free of the influence of empire and had not

been shaped by the great global conflicts to come, was, I think, in a way more pure in terms of the examination of our strategic circumstances. These conflicts have subsequently shaped our perspectives. Our strategic discourse had become overwhelmingly land-centric and in my view lost, for a while, the understanding which we once had, of the inherent value of the maritime domain to our security and prosperity.

In a rather ironic twist we seem to be back to where we were over a century ago. In 1902 for the then Commandant of the Commonwealth Military Forces, Major-General Sir Edward Hutton, said:

The Defence of Australia cannot, moreover, be considered apart from the defence of Australian interests. Australia depends for its commercial success and its future development firstly upon its seaborne trade and secondly upon the existence, maintenance and extension of fixed and certain markets for its produce outside Australian waters. It therefore follows that Australian interests cannot be assured by the defence of Australia alone.

Hutton's view is made more relevant today by the pervasiveness of maritime trade, the explosion in offshore activity, a just in time economy and the growing realisation that our strategic economic centre of gravity is the protection of our ability to trade.

The good thing is that this is not a service driven debate, I have made the point numerous times that a maritime strategy is not about the Navy, it is inherently joint in military terms and needs to integrate all the elements of national power. Talking about a maritime strategic school of thought is a realisation of our geo-strategic circumstances and the

maritime nature of the strategy that we need to preserve our prosperity, our sovereignty and our interests.

There is clearly much that we can pick over over during the course of this conference that has direct relevance to today's circumstances. My only regret is that I cannot stay and participate.

I would like to thank the speakers for the time and effort they have put into preparing for this conference. I see a number of names who have worked hard over many years to improve the scholarship and knowledge in the field of Australian naval history. And I see the names of some distinguished students of naval history and maritime strategy from around the world. Thank you to you all for the contribution you are making – we quite literally could not have this conference without you.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the sponsors for the 2013 King Hall Naval History Conference – the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales in Canberra, the Australian Naval Institute and the Australian War Memorial. Your commitment to support and further the study and knowledge of Australian naval history is greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff of the Sea Power Centre – Australia, particularly those in the Navy History Section, for the significant contribution that they make.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you enjoy the conference, which I have great pleasure in declaring open.