

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1900, Australia stood poised for nationhood. Its six self-governing colonies, long debating federation, prepared to unite under a single Commonwealth. That year, the British Parliament passed the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, laying the legal foundation for unification. On 1 January 1901, the Act came into force and the Commonwealth was born.

1900 was thus a year of anticipation, as leaders and citizens shaped the new federal system and Australia's role on the world stage. It was also the year the Navy League first emerged in Australia—125 years ago today.

Preceding 1900, the British Navy League had written letters to many prominent Australian's and newspapers arguing for the establishment of a Navy League in Australia. The secretary of the League, COMMANDER W.C CRUTCHLEY, wrote in several newspapers Quote "*The Navy League seeks, then, to plant its branches in every centre of population throughout the Australian colonies for the purpose of spreading information as to the vital importance to the whole British people of the naval supremacy upon which depends their trade, their properties and their national existence.*"

In response, and through some family ties with the British Navy League, a branch of the League was established in Launceston, Tasmania with a warrant being issued on 26 November, 1900 from London. This would be known as the North Tasmanian Branch. It was the 53rd branch in the Empire and part of a growing chorus of voices advocating for naval strength as the surest guarantee of peace.

As the 20th century dawned, the Royal Navy remained vital not only to Britain but to its Dominions and Colonies. Branches of the Navy League sprang up across the Empire—from Auckland in 1896 to Wellington in 1904, and soon after in Sydney and Melbourne. These branches didn't just advocate; they inspired. They created youth organisations to foster a love of the sea among teenagers with names such as the Navy League Boys Naval Brigade, the Navy League Sea Cadets, and later, the Australian Sea Cadet Corps.

The navy league started establishing sea cadet units in 1920 to teach Australia's youth about a life at sea and how it was vital to never take it for granted. Though the Naval Defence Act of the time limited what the Navy could offer, it provided uniforms, training, activities and equipment. The League, ever resourceful, handled everything else—from drill halls, personal to administration and everything in between. In 1947 the Naval Board recognised the sea cadets, and granted funding for their activities as well as a name change to the Australian Sea Cadet Corps.

In 1950, The Navy League of Australia was formed as an independent autonomous body (making this year our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary as well). This new Federal Council composed mostly of retired naval officers, with VADM Sir John Collins, who the Collins class submarines are named after, being one of its first Federal Presidents. However, membership was open to anyone.

In 1973 Defence formally took control of the naval cadets from the Navy League. However, in 1975 the Whitlam govt decided it wanted to disband all cadets across Australia. The League was incensed to say the least having spent so much time raising the cadet movement and giving it a great future. The Government gave the League 12 months to prepare to take the cadets back and resume its formal responsibilities. The League lobbied the Whitlam Govt and the opposition for the continuation of the cadet movement under the control of Defence given the resources it could bring to bear compared to the League. The opposition in the form of the shadow Minister for Defence, The Hon Jim Killin, made it their policy to continue with cadets as part of the Defence Department. However, the Whitlam Govt remained firm. It was only through the dismissal and the election of

the Fraser govt was this policy to disband the cadets reversed and cadets stayed in the control of the Department of Defence.

Since its inception, the League's vision and mission has also extended well beyond the training of young Australians as cadets. One of its earliest and most passionate battles was the campaign to save the nation's flagship, the battlecruiser *HMAS Australia*. Commissioned in 1913, she had served with distinction during the First World War, including as part of the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow. Yet, in the aftermath of the war, international diplomacy sealed her fate.

The Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 treated *HMAS Australia* as a Royal Navy unit, ordering her scrapping. The Navy League fought this decision, arguing Australia's defence needs lay in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, not Europe's. Despite their campaign, *Australia* was scuttled off Sydney Heads in 1924. Though unsuccessful, the League's stand marked a turning point, showing Australians were ready to challenge imperial decisions and press for a fleet shaped by their own strategic realities

Throughout our history we have always supported a strong and independent RAN.

We supported the Navy's efforts to establish a carrier-based fleet air arm in the 1940s and, in the turbulent 1960s, stood firm during times of tragedy and challenge. The MELBOURNE/VOYAGER collision and the loss of five midshipmen during a training exercise when their whaler boat capsized in rough seas were sobering reminders of the risks our sailors face. The League responded not with retreat from Navy, but with resolve—seeking deeper engagement with Navy leadership and advocating for transparency and reform to bring the Australian people along on the journey to help Navy help itself.

For decades, we fought for the adoption of nuclear-powered submarines. We published numerous articles in our magazine THE NAVY, we did special lift out supplements, made submissions to parliamentary inquiries, held lectures and issued many press releases. For we knew these vessels were not simple machines of war — but the apex predators of the sea, unmatched in stealth and endurance. Time and again, we invested our resources and energy to plead the case for them, often against stiff opposition.

At times, we paid a heavy price for our stance. Critics came from every corner — armchair admirals, politicians, even serving naval officers, all wishing to play the man and not the ball. I myself felt the sting of this resistance when my transfer request from the Army Reserve to the Naval Reserve Intelligence arm in 2001 was refused, because of my close association with the Navy League as the magazine's editor and the league's advocacy for nuclear propulsion. Yet we held firm, because the strategic justification and need was undeniable.

Today, that vision is finally becoming reality. Under the AUKUS partnership, Australia is on the path to acquiring nuclear-powered submarines — a decision that will transform our Navy and help secure our maritime future. These submarines will give us the ability to patrol vast distances, remain submerged for months, and deter threats in ways that diesel-electric boats simply cannot. It's a shame that many of those in the league that took up this fight are no longer with us.

Our fight does not end here. We continue to champion a vital capability: fixed-wing aviation at sea — in crude terms, the aircraft carrier. A flat-decked ship with an island superstructure off to one side, the carrier has long been recognised as history's most versatile weapon system. Its strength lies in flexibility: no costly refits are needed to change its role, only a change of air group. Aircraft fly in, fly out — and the ship transforms overnight. The real cost lies in the aircraft, not the steel. We need only recall *HMAS Melbourne*'s contribution after Cyclone Tracy, when her Skyhawks and Trackers flew off and helicopters with building supplies flew in. Carrier air power works — proven

in the Pacific campaign of world war II and reaffirmed in humanitarian relief. For deeper analysis, I commend Dr Norman Friedman's article in our current edition.

Our large helicopter dock ships (LHDs) are prime candidates for enhancement into a true aircraft carrier capability, given their flat decks and island superstructures off to one side. With the Army acquiring its own amphibious fleet, the LHDs' transport role now has latitude to expand into broader warfighting tasks.

This would be a practical response to looming challenges, including the growing threat of Chinese aggression projected for 2027 by nearly every strategic affairs think tank and intelligence agency in the pacific area. (THE AUSTRALIAN TODAY)

Carriers deliver rapid, mobile combat power across thousands of kilometres. Our push to adapt the LHDs aligns with the Howard Government's original intent to preserve fixed-wing design features in the ships for later modification. Navantia, the LHD's builder, has already prepared plans to do so.

Our vision includes the F-35B Joint Strike Fighter, capable of short take-off and vertical landing, as well as unmanned aerial systems for reach and persistence. It also allows for allied JSFs operating from our LHDs from the USMC, Royal Navy, Japanese, Italian, and Singaporean naval and air forces. Finally, our policy embraces other forms of sea-based airpower, such as arming Seahawk helicopters with Naval Strike Missiles to push the fleet's defensive perimeter far beyond the horizon

So, whether beneath the waves with nuclear submarines or above the waves with carrier aviation, our cause has always been the same: to ensure Australia has the tools to defend itself in an increasingly uncertain world. These are not luxuries. They are necessities. And we will continue to fight for them for the good of Australia.

When govts demanded unreasonable austerity from defence, we have fought back

We have made submissions to Government on every white paper since 1976. And will continue to do so.

In 1998 we unsuccessfully urged the purchase of four USN Kidd-class destroyers offered for sale instead of upgrading our Adelaide-class frigates, which eventually cost nearly five times more, took twice as long, and delivered far less capability. The powerful Kidd class destroyers could have entered service within months and transformed the RAN's future. Taiwan ended up acquiring them in 2001. Ironically they actually remain in service today and will be among the first warships to confront any Chinese aggression in the region.

We were the first the raise the topic of TBMD for the RAN in early 2000s

Based on the lessons of the East Timor campaign we put the case for large amphibious assault ships with significant aviation capabilities before the Canberra class LHDs were even thought of. We called them Littoral Support Ships, which the Sydney Morning Hearld picked up on and published further.

In the mid-2000s we argued vigorously for a 4<sup>th</sup> Hobart class Air Warfare Destroyer, which in hindsight would be well suited to our current needs and potentially would have made the climb out of the shipbuilding valley of death less expensive and steep.

We fought for greater attention for naval gunfire support given the significant amphibious assault capability we now have. Let's not relearn the lessons of Gallipoli was our slogan.

We attempted to correct the record as to who really stopped the Germans invading Britain in 1940 during the Battle of Britain, hint it wasn't the RAF. We didn't do this to promote a single service mentality, but rather put the battle into a proper joint warfare perspective for how to defend an island. We believe that Australia's maritime defence, is a joint military effort. Thus, Aust will need its ADF more than it needs its army, navy and Airforce for our enduring geography will always mean conflict will be maritime in nature.

More recently, we have defended the Hunter class frigates where BAE and defence would not. We have educated many critics by highlighting how cutting edge and world leading these ships will be. They are so adept at hunting submarines quietly that they have been described as floating submarines. The only people to rejoice at the current governments decision to cancel the last three were the Chinese and Russian submarine services.

Apart for advocating for a stronger maritime Defence we also at times have defended Navy directly.

In 2014 When the ABC accused RAN Sailors of torturing asylum seekers it was the League that sprang to their defence with protests and complaints to the ABC, ACMA and Govt. We printed our displeasure in THE NAVY magazine and published the question "who is more important to the security of the nation a sailor, a warship captain .... or an ABC journalist". We then cheekily published the salary figures of a RAN Sailor and CMDR and compared those to leaked salary figures for the ABC's leading lights. They were not amused.

Currently we are calling for more spending on defence with supplementation to the defence budget for the nation building effects nuclear powered submarine production will have for Australia.

Recently the Federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers called people advocating for more Defence spending "War Mongering Cookers". Which is fine, we expect that. Kim Beasley once called the Navy League a bunch of Colonel Blimps. The AFR has referred to us, disparagingly, as the dear old navy league. But we don't really care what people say as we tend to be on right side of history with what we advocate for. And that's enough for us.

As you have heard from our Federal Vice President Simon, one of the League's most enduring contributions to the maritime defence debate is *The Navy* magazine, published since 1938. For decades, it gave voice to the 'Silent Service' offering insight, advocacy and education. Important naval events, both contemporary and historical have been covered in layman's terms to promote a greater understanding.

As part of our support role to Navy, in 1970, the League introduced the Perpetual Community Award, recognizing ships and establishments that serve their communities with distinction. It's a reminder that our Navy is not just a fighting force—it's a neighbour, a partner, and a symbol of national pride. On this front, I can announce tonight for the first time that HMAS SYDNEY has won this year's Navy League Community Award for outstanding service to the local and Australian community at large.

Ladies and gentleman

Nearly all Australians currently take for granted access to the sea and the economic security and growth it provides. They have never seen or experienced the effect of supply disruption to 99% of our trade. They have never seen a conflict where we have had to fight for sea control. Without shipping this nation stops both in terms of supplies and income. So sea control is vital to our very survival as a nation and a functioning democracy.

We sort of had a glimpse of what supply chain disruption can produce during COVID. In some parts of the country social cohesion started to break down with people fighting over toilet paper..... for a respiratory disease.

A recent article in The Australian reported that people don't believe Defence is a priority for government spending. The Albanese Government, heeding advice from the people, are thus giving Defence the attention it attracts from the electorate. This isn't to say one party is worse than the other. During the recent federal election, the liberal party's own polling had Defence at number 7, and acted accordingly. And that's fair enough, that's how democracy works.

So as a League, we need to remind Australians that we are girt by sea, not beach. Or to put it another way, no shipping no shopping.

The League's most ambitious educate and advocate project to date was the video series *The Sea and Australia*, produced in the 1980s at a cost exceeding well over \$200,000, or over \$1m in today's figures. It was only possible through the generosity of Mr Robert Otto Albert.

This two-and-a-half-hour program, comprising six episodes, covered topics such as:

- 1      The Voyage of the First Fleet, Sydney Cove, and Early Settlement
- 2      The Nature of the Sea
- 3      The Resources of the Sea
- 4      Commercial Shipping, Ports and Harbours
- 5      Navigation and Safety at Sea
- 6      Protection and Conservation (including RAN history)

Distributed free to over 2,500 secondary schools with support from six state education authorities, the video remains a landmark in Australian maritime education.

So with this example in mind, I am proud to announce tonight that at our Annual Meeting earlier today we voted to enact a new initiative called *Project Albert*—named in honour of our dear friend and generous benefactor, Mr Robert Otto Albert.

Project Albert will encompass three phases:

**Phase 1**, we will ensure that as many high school libraries in Australia that have a naval cadet unit within an hour's drive will receive a copy of *The Navy* magazine. Each issue will also include a dedicated page inviting young Australians to consider joining the naval cadets.

**Phase 2**, will expand this initiative to reach every primary school in the nation, planting the seeds of maritime awareness and pride even earlier.

**In Phase 3**, we plan to acquire and digitally restore *The Sea and Australia*, making it available on our new YouTube channel. And if sufficient funds can be secured, we aspire to go further—to reshoot *The Sea and Australia* for a modern audience, ensuring its enduring message continues to resonate.

We need to remember though: just as the original film was made possible through the remarkable generosity of Mr Albert, so too will the future of this project depend on the support of those willing to invest in Australia's maritime story. If you know of someone with the means and the vision to leave their mark on this vital cause, I invite and implore you to connect them with us

Ladies and gentlemen, at times, we confess, our words and actions sometimes have struck hard against governments in the defence portfolio. Yet when we are guilty of such severity, it is usually not the cold counsel of reason but the burning fire of the heart that drives us. For this is the ancient snare of humankind: to mistake the gravity of our emotion for the substance of our argument, to believe that passion alone can bear the weight of truth. Such is the commitment to our mission to ensure that deterrence works in peace. And you can only have peace if you prepare for war, properly. We do not want one more name placed on these walls and make no apologies for how we go about that.

As you have heard tonight, the Navy League of Australia plays a unique role in fostering public awareness, supporting naval heritage and advocating for a strong and capable maritime defence posture. Our motto is Keep Watch, our mission as you have ascertained already is to Educate, Advocate and Support.

So tonight as we honour the League's past, we also celebrate its present, and commit to its future. May it continue to inspire young Australians, inform our leaders, and remind us all that our control of the sea is central to our nation's future.

Thank you.