

1890.

NEW ZEALAND.

COLONIAL DEFENCES:

(REMARKS BY COLONIAL DEFENCE COMMITTEE ON REPORTS BY MAJOR-GENERAL J. BEVAN EDWARDS, C.B.)

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

PROPOSED ORGANIZATION OF THE MILITARY FORCES OF THE AUSTRALASIAN COLONIES.

THE Colonial Defence Committee* have had under consideration the Reports of Major-General J. B. Edwards, C.B., on the Military Forces and Defence of the Australasian Colonies, which have been referred to them by the Secretaries of State for War and the Colonies. While, for reasons which will be stated, they are unable to agree in some of the recommendations embodied in these reports, they are impressed by the ability displayed, and the care which has been bestowed upon them.

Before proceeding to consider the recommendations of the Inspecting Officer in the case of the individual colonies, the Committee desire to reassert the general principles which should guide these colonies in adjusting the standard of their defences. It is essential that such principles should be constantly borne in mind, since the absence of a definite basis of policy necessarily leads to wasteful expenditure.

The general requirements of defence which present themselves to the Australasian Colonies depend solely upon the probable nature and strength of the attack. No country can be provided against every remote contingency which may be suggested, and reasonable probabilities, rather than possibilities, form the ultimate basis of the war preparations of every great Power.

The Colonial Defence Committee have in various memoranda expressed their views as to the conditions of probable attack in Australasian waters, and these views have been embodied in Colonial Office circular despatch of the 14th January, 1890.

It may be useful, however, to recapitulate these conditions.

On account of their geographical position, and of the now considerable population in all these colonies except Western Australia, there is no British territory so little liable to aggression as that of Australasia. In view of the armed forces maintained, and the strong spirit which animates them, territorial aggression, except on a large scale, is out of the question. To endeavour to place small bodies of troops on shore would be to court disaster, with consequent injury to the prestige of any Power which attempted such a policy. Any force, destined for aggression, even if safely landed, must be of a strength sufficient to conquer and hold either an important strategic point, or a considerable portion of territory, under the certain condition of losing its communications by sea.

Field operations on Australasian territory would require a large expeditionary force of all arms, fully equipped; and the idea of attempting such operations with the small landing force available, even from a strong squadron of cruisers, may be altogether dismissed.

It is evident that transport for a large expeditionary force could not be prepared in any of the advanced bases of any Power without the fact being known, when a corresponding redistribution, if necessary, of the British navy would be made.

Such an expedition, whether despatched from an advanced base or from Europe, could not hope to reach its destination until the British navy had been definitely worsted. Even then the difficulties and the risks would be so considerable, that, in view of other enterprises of a more hopeful nature, it is almost inconceivable that the attempt would be made. History affords no parallel of such difficulties successfully overcome.

Attack upon the Australian littoral thus reduces itself to raids by an enemy's cruisers based upon his defended ports. Such raids might be undertaken to obtain coal, which might be urgently required, or with the object of attempting to extort an indemnity under threat of bombardment. Coal, if on shore, could not be seized, even in a port possessing no coast defences, without landing men, and, in view of the small crews carried by cruisers, this proceeding would be extremely dangerous in face of armed and organized resistance. It is inconceivable that any Australasian

* The Colonial Defence Committee is now charged with the duty of considering the larger questions of Imperial defence. Its Chairman is the Inspector-General of Fortifications, and its members are the Directors of Naval and Military Intelligence, and officers representing the Departments of the Adjutant-General and of the Director of Artillery.