

Printed for the Committee of Imperial Defence. August 1938.

SECRET.

Copy No. 35

1463-B.

COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS.

(Previous C.I.D. Paper No. 1455-B.) (6)

*Copy of a Letter, dated July 23, 1938, from the Colonial Office to the Secretary,
Committee of Imperial Defence.*

(7025/2/38.)

Sir,

I AM directed by Mr. Secretary MacDonald to refer to the letter* from the Dominions Office, No. 720/128 of the 9th July, enclosing a copy of a despatch† from the Governor-General of New Zealand regarding the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands, and to transmit to you, for the consideration of the Committee of Imperial Defence, a copy of a despatch from the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific commenting on Lord Galway's despatch.

2. Copies of this letter and enclosure are being sent to the Dominions Office and Air Ministry.

* * *
(Signed) J. A. CALDER.

ENCLOSURE.

*Copy of a Despatch, dated June 13, 1938, from the High Commissioner for the
Western Pacific to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.*

Sir,

I HAVE recently received from the Governor-General of New Zealand a copy of a secret despatch,† dated the 20th May, which has been addressed to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, and for your convenience of reference I attach copies to this despatch. You will doubtless wish to receive at an early date any comments which I may wish to make from the point of view of Fiji and the Western Pacific, and I therefore anticipate such a request.

2. The extent of the future strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to the British Empire is set forth, in paragraph 1 of Lord Galway's despatch, in the quotation from Paper No. C.O.S. 586.§ The despatch then proceeds to envisage the Fijian and Tongan Groups as the key to New Zealand, and to draw the conclusion that it is essential to prevent an enemy from establishing himself in this area. Fiji, and by inference the Island of Viti Levu, being selected as the best focal point, it is stated that "the provision of landing grounds and

* Enclosure to C.I.D. Paper No. 1455-B. (6)

† Annex to Enclosure to C.I.D. Paper No. 1455-B.

§ Also C.I.D. Paper No. 1327-B. (1m-137)

other facilities for the operation of air reinforcements, will be an important addition to the existing means of defence." The existing means of defence are, as you are aware, extremely meagre. Suva, the capital and the oil-fuelling station, possesses no anti-aircraft guns and no artillery. It has been presumed that air attack will not assume serious proportions, and that the main danger would be a cruiser attempting to land raiding parties to seize or destroy the cable station and the wireless station as well as the oil-fuel depots. There is no question that suitable landing facilities for aeroplanes on Viti Levu would provide a valuable addition to the defences of Fiji by enabling air reinforcements to arrive from New Zealand. Incidentally, I feel that the existence of an aerodrome in Suva or anywhere else as part of a defence scheme should also connote anti-aircraft guns and defences. Nor is it clear to the layman why aeroplanes, with their concomitant necessity of aerodromes, should be selected for reconnaissance purposes in an area where nature has been lavish in the provision of sheltered waters suitable for the use of seaplanes.

3. The proposal to use Fiji as a focal point, from which might run a series of aerodromes on the Routes A, B, C and D, seems to me to open up wider possibilities. I gather that the aerodromes are to be undefended—indeed, they could scarcely be defended in present circumstances—and if that is the case, may they not prove a double-edged weapon? This seems to apply particularly to Route A, which the New Zealand Government proposes to take first. It leads straight from Suva to the Marshall Islands, but it also leads straight from the Marshall Islands to Suva, and might facilitate the air attack which, in present circumstances, from ships, is not considered likely to be serious. Whether or not any refuelling stores are kept on the route, it would remain an inviting and open road. It is possible that the general improvement of co-ordination of wireless services in the Western Pacific, which is now under consideration, and the local scheme for establishing local wireless links throughout the Gilbert and Ellice Islands may obviate some of the need for air reconnaissance in that direction other than by occasional seaplane visits.

4. I need hardly say that I am whole-heartedly in favour of proceeding, as soon as your advisers consider it desirable, with the provision of landing facilities for aeroplanes in Fiji, both seaplanes and land planes, and the necessary technical and professional advice would doubtless be available from New Zealand and would be welcome.

5. If you decide to approve in principle the proposals made by the New Zealand Government, I shall, of course, render every possible assistance to the officers detailed to make preliminary surveys. It will be realised that on any save the largest islands, the clearance of space necessary for an aerodrome would very seriously affect the living resources of these already over-populated atolls, but if the strategic need is conceded, such considerations are relatively minor matters which can be dealt with by some of the measures for transfer of population to other islands of the Pacific which I have now under consideration.

(Signed)

* * *
A. F. RICHARDS,
High Commissioner.

A. L. Parkinson

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(Dup.)

THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HIS BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

Printed for the Committee of Imperial Defence. July 1938.

SECRET

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1455-B.

(Also Paper No. C.O.S. 751.)

COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS.

(Previous C.I.D. Paper No. 1327-B.) (10-137)

Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee.

WE have had under consideration a letter* from the Under-Secretary of State, Dominions Office, to the Secretary, Committee of Imperial Defence, covering a despatch† from the Governor-General of New Zealand on the subject of the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands.

2. In the opening paragraphs of his despatch, the Governor-General refers to a Report which we prepared in May 1937 on the above subject (C.I.D. Paper No. 1327-B), which was forwarded to His Majesty's Government in New Zealand. In our conclusions to that Paper, we expressed the following views:—

11. We conclude that we would endeavour to establish our sovereignty over any of the Pacific Islands offering facilities for fuelling bases or landing grounds. It should be our policy to assist, where feasible, the development of those facilities which would be of value in war. We should, at the same time, take whatever measures are possible to gain information as to Japanese activities in the Islands."

3. In pursuance of the above recommendation, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand propose that, using Fiji as a focal point, future development of air routes should take the form of extending the route New Zealand-Fiji to the north, north-east and east in the following manner:—

- Route "A": Fiji-Gilbert Islands.
- Route "B": Fiji-Phoenix Islands-Fanning and Christmas Islands.
- Route "C": Fiji-Samoa-Northern Cook Group.
- Route "D": Fiji-Tonga Islands-Cook Islands.

4. In paragraphs 5, 6 and 7 of his despatch the Governor-General points out that the four routes referred to above would enable aircraft to reach the greater part of the Southern Pacific if the need arose, and goes on to state that His Majesty's Government in New Zealand propose, as a first step, to make a full survey of Route "A," i.e., the route from Fiji to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Furthermore, owing to the importance of this route to the security of New Zealand, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand express their willingness to bear the cost of undertaking the technical work of such a survey.

* Enclosure.

† Annex to Enclosure.

5. We entirely agree with the above proposal, and we recommend that a telegram to this effect should be despatched forthwith to the Governor-General of New Zealand. We suggest that this telegram should include an expression of the appreciation of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of the promptitude with which His Majesty's Government in New Zealand have followed up the recommendations contained in C.I.D. Paper No. 1327-B, and of their willingness to bear the cost of the survey of Route "A."

6. We note that in paragraph 8 of his despatch the Governor-General suggests that His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom might think it advisable that representatives of Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand should meet at some suitable point to discuss Pacific Islands matters. We are not clear whether such discussions are intended to cover political, commercial and financial questions, or would merely be confined to the strategic, &c., aspect. If the latter is the case, we suggest that the Commodore, New Zealand Division, and the Group Captain, Royal Air Force, attached to the New Zealand Air Force, should be authorised to represent His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom. If, however, the discussions are to be of a broader nature it might be advisable for the Air Officer Commanding, Singapore, and the Commander-in-Chief, China, to be represented rather than that the discussions should be conducted by officers under the New Zealand Government.

(Signed) CHATFIELD.
C. L. N. NEWALL.
GORT.

2 Whitehall Gardens, S.W. 1,
July 23, 1938.

ENCLOSURE.

Copy of a letter dated July 9, 1938, from the Dominions Office to the Secretary, Committee of Imperial Defence.

[F 720/128]

* * *

WITH reference to your letter No. I.D. /P/8. of the 30th June, 1937,* I am directed by Lord Stanley to transmit, for the consideration of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the accompanying copy of a despatch from the Governor-General of New Zealand, on the subject of the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands.

2. Copies of this letter and enclosure are being sent to the Colonial Office and the Air Ministry.

(Signed) * * *
C. W. DIXON.

ANNEX TO ENCLOSURE.

Copy of a despatch dated May 20, 1938, from the Governor-General of New Zealand to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.

* * *

AT the instance of my Prime Minister, I have the honour to inform Your Lordship that His Majesty's Government in New Zealand have recently given considerable attention to the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands, and have noted the views expressed in Paper No. C.O.S. 586† (Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee). In this Paper, after suggesting that in War Japanese

* Not reproduced.

† Also enclosure to C.I.D. Paper No. 1327-B.

activities in this area would be limited to raiding operations, the Chiefs of Staff go on to say:—

“8. Air forces maintained in Australia and New Zealand could also take part in operations against raiders. As aircraft ranges increase, it will become possible to extend these operations to the Pacific Islands area, and any development of air facilities in this area should, therefore, prove of strategic value.

9. Any operations against raiders would be facilitated by a good intelligence service in the Pacific Islands, comprising wireless stations at numerous positions.

10. From our point of view, therefore, the Pacific Islands are of strategic value in so far as they provide us with fuelling bases for our Naval forces, possible landing grounds for our Air Forces, and positions for the establishment of wireless stations. Moreover, if our system of communications can be sufficiently developed the chances of Japan using any Islands in our possession as fuelling bases would be considerably reduced.

Conclusions.

11. We conclude that we would endeavour to establish our sovereignty over any of the Pacific Islands offering facilities for fuelling bases or landing grounds. It should be our policy to assist, where feasible, the development of those facilities which would be of value in war. We should at the same time take whatever measures are possible to gain information as to Japanese activities in the Islands.”

2. The programme of air development which is now in progress in New Zealand will, by 1940, provide two regular squadrons equipped with long-range aircraft capable of reaching the Pacific Islands and operating therefrom for any of the purposes mentioned above. Their ability to do so will depend, however, on the provision of the necessary air route facilities. Although much useful information on the topography of the islands has been obtained by ships of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy during recent cruises, data is still lacking on many points, and any conclusions as to the facilities which can be provided must be regarded as tentative. Inspection of the map indicates that the movements of aircraft would be facilitated by the provision of some central point from which routes would radiate. This point should be to the north of New Zealand in the Fijian or the Tongan Groups. Suitable areas for the development of a landing ground are available in these Groups, of which the former is preferable owing to its size and the greater facilities which it offers.

3. There is also a further aspect which is of especial importance to New Zealand. The increased range of aircraft now brings Auckland and much of the North Island within the range of bombers based on the Fijian and Tongan Groups. It is therefore essential that an enemy should be prevented from establishing himself in this area, and it is clear that the security of these islands is of strategic importance to New Zealand. The provision of landing grounds and other facilities for the operation of air reinforcements will be an important addition to the existing means of defence.

4. In any system of routes it appears that Fiji should be regarded as a focal point, and the route New Zealand-Fiji should be the first to be developed. Future development might then take the form of extending this route to the north, north-east and east, the purposes of these routes and the facilities necessary for their operation being considered in more detail below.

Route A: Fiji-Gilbert Islands.—Paragraph 11 of the C.O.S. Report quoted above refers to the necessity of gaining information of Japanese activities. Little is known of the extent of the defences which the Japanese have prepared in the Marshall Islands, but their position just north of the Equator provides a convenient base for any vessels raiding into the South Pacific. It will therefore be desirable to establish a chain of landing grounds through the Gilbert and Ellice Colony terminating sufficiently far north to bring the Islands of the Marshall Group within reconnaissance range of aircraft. Intermediate landing grounds would have to be provided along this route, especially where it crosses the belt subject to violent cyclonic storms, but these landing grounds

could be used to assist in the administration of the Islands, the provision of medical aid, &c. The population of the Gilbert and Ellice Group, excluding Ocean Island, is approximately 100 Europeans and 30,000 Natives, whilst the Islands have a considerable local trade. Linking up the larger Islands by air could not fail to prove of value to the administration. Further investigation is required before the relative suitability of the Islands can be assessed, but from the information now available it appears that the majority of the Islands are flat and possess sufficient area. The chief difficulty will be the effect on the local food supply, should it be found necessary to cut down any considerable number of coconut palms.

Route B: Fiji-Phoenix Islands-Fanning and Christmas Islands.—This route would pass through Samoa, the Union Group, and the Phoenix Islands, and would link up at Christmas Island with Route C referred to below, which traverses the northern Cook Group and the Line Group. The reconnaissances which have so far been undertaken indicate that there should be no insuperable difficulties in organising a landplane route. His Majesty's Government in New Zealand have already agreed to garrison Fanning Island in war, and this group will provide means of connecting up with that garrison. It will also follow the line of any future trans-Pacific commercial landplane route, and any development work which is undertaken is likely to be of ultimate commercial value.

Route C: Fiji-Samoa-Northern Cook-Line Group.—Reports so far received suggest that landing strips can be obtained in the majority of the Islands, but fuller information will be necessary before any final conclusions are reached.

Route D: Fiji-Tonga Islands-Cook Islands.—Further information is necessary, especially as regards facilities in the Cook Islands. These Islands can also be reached direct from New Zealand.

5. The four routes referred to above would enable aircraft to reach the greater part of the South Pacific if the need arose. Owing to the distances, there can never be any question of a continuous patrol, nor is it advocated that aircraft should be permanently stationed in this area; but the provision of landing facilities along certain main routes will enable aircraft to be flown to any desired area should the necessity arise.

6. It is appreciated that no final decision can be reached until further surveys have been undertaken. His Majesty's Government in New Zealand would therefore like to be informed if His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom concur in principle in the establishment of the routes described above, and whether, as a first step, they agree to a full survey being made of Route A: Fiji-Gilbert and Ellice Islands.

7. Owing to the importance of this route to the security of New Zealand, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand are willing to bear the cost of undertaking the technical work of such a survey and providing His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom with a full report.

8. His Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth of Australia and the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific have been supplied with a copy of this despatch for their information. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom might possibly think it advisable that representatives of all three countries (Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand) should meet at some suitable point to discuss Pacific Islands matters; but His Majesty's Government in New Zealand do not suggest that this should delay the expression of opinion from His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom on the points raised in the two preceding paragraphs.

(Signed)

GALWAY,

Governor-General.