EQUIPMENT OF THE ARME FORCES

The Prime Minister recently introduced the most important defence program ever seen in peace time in Australia. I have undertaken the somewhat ambitious task of condensing the essential elements of his one-hour statement into two of these reports, each of six or seven minutes. Last week I spoke about the question of National Service training, and this week I want to talk about the equipment of the three Services.

The Prime Minister opened his statement by noting the deterioration in our strategic situation. He drew attention to the increased difficulties in South-East Asia, in Laos and Vietnam, and in particular to Indonesia's policies which could lead to war between Malaysia and Indonesia and this, of course, would involve Australia. He emphasised the tragedy of this situation because he pointed out that this was the only point of difference we had with Indonesia, which is a country with which, for geographic and other reasons, we have much in common. He made it plain, however, that if this one point of difference makes it necessary to oppose Indonesia with all the power at our command, Australia will do so.

The Prime Minister spoke relatively briefly about the Navy and the R.A.A.F. whose expansion will continue to rely upon volunteers. It was pointed out that the present naval program involves the construction of ten new ships, including three of the latest guided missile destroyers, two type 12 anti-submarine frigates and four submarines, in addition to other draft designed specifically to meet our obligations in and around New Guinea and in assistance to Malaysia.

The Government has always placed a special emphasis on the anti-submarine role, not only of the Navy but also of the Air Force. At the present moment two squadrons are equipped with anti-submarine aircraft. One of these squadrons is equipped with a slightly older type of Neptune, and this will have its planes replaced with Lockheed Orion aircraft which have an outstanding performance in the location and destruction of submarines. It is the best aircraft of its type available. Ten will be ordered.

Attention was drawn to the new aircraft coming into the R.A.A.F., to the 100 Mirage and the 24 F111, both of which are the latest and most effective aircraft of their type. Special reference was made to the support and logistic role of the Air Force, and as a result twelve new Hercules transports will be purchased, as an addition to the twelve we already have, since these aircraft can carry about 40% more than the older type Hercules.

A great deal of other equipment is going to be ordered for all three Services, for example, expenditure on Army equipment will be nearly doubled. It is not always remembered that expenditure on equipment was increased in the review of May, 1963 from £10M to £17½M. During this current program this figure will be progressively increased to £30M in 1967/68.

For several years the Government has placed a great deal of importance on the manoeuvrability of our forces, and as a result an extensive program of airport construction is underway in appropriate parts of Australia and New Guinea.
In May, 1963 the Government authorised the expansion of the Pacific Island Regiment from 700 to 1,400, and it has now further authorised the expansion of the Pacific Island Regiment to 3,500. The emphasis that has been placed on works in and around New Guinea, on the expansion of the Pacific Island Regiment and on the Patrol boats that will be suitable for use in New Guinea or Borneo waters clearly indicates that the Government is paying very close attention to the possibility of hostilities with Indonesia.

It should not be thought that what the Government is now doing represents a sudden spurt in defence. It is rather the culmination of a graduated program that began in May, 1963. In that year a program was envisaged which was to raise expenditure from £214M. in 1962/63 to £270M in 1966/67. Since May, 1963 however, additional items of equipment have been ordered which involved an estimated cost of £118M. The effect of this can be seen in that this year we are already spending just under £300M. In the last two years therefore it is plain that the pace of defence development has been increasing quite rapidly. The result of this new statement, if nothing further is ordered and nothing more is done beyond what is envisaged by the Prime Minister, will be to lift defence expenditure to £430M in 1967/68.

This program will provide Australia with defence forces which will be capable of rapid expansion in time of emergency and which will be able to play a most effective part in our own defence. When we consider the threats that could confront Australia it is my belief that we cannot do less than we are in fact doing. We may all regret the necessity to divert an increased proportion of our resources towards our own defence, but international circumstances quite beyond our control have made this necessary.

The first duty of the Commonwealth Government is to provide for the defence and security of Australia and its people. A great deal has been done through a system of alliances with our friends, but the necessities of our present situation have made it inevitable that we should do more in a direct fashion for ourselves, and this the Government has done.