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**THE BRITISH ARMY AND THE COUNTER-INSURGENCY
CAMPAIGN IN VAN DIEMEN'S LAND WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE BLACK LINE**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities, University of Tasmania, December 1995.

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Abstract of Thesis

The British Army of the 1820's was not trained for counter-insurgency duties to operate in small detached parties. Their role in the campaign against the Aborigines was to aid the civil power, and tensions and inefficiencies resulted when troops were directed and commanded by civilians. The colonial garrison was commanded by an experienced soldier and administrator, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur. He exercised a dual civil/military function ensuring all resources were integrated through an administrative system centred on his police districts. By 1830, Arthur sought a solution to the Aboriginal problem based on a dual strategy of conciliation in the tribal lands, and use of military force, to expel the natives from the settled areas.

The Aborigines developed formidable skills as guerilla fighters, and their tactics took advantage of their enemies' weapons limitations. With loss of traditional hunting grounds, the Aborigines were forced to rely on raiding settlers' huts for supplies. This generated stronger counter-measures, such as martial law in 1828 and the Black Line in 1830, which was the climax of the counter-insurgency campaign. This was a sweep and cordon operation, combining troops, and civilians who were called out under a *levy en masse*, under Army command. The troops, now under command of their own officers, were disciplined and efficient.

Opinions differ in contemporary and historical writings, concerning the

Black Line, as to whether it was a 'fiasco' or, in terms of Arthur's dual strategy, a success. As he did not achieve his military aim to confine the Aborigines in Tasman's Peninsula, the Line was a failure, but due to Walpole's contact, it was not a total failure, and as it was meticulously planned and executed, the term 'fiasco' is inappropriate. As the Line directly assisted the conciliatory arm of the dual strategy, it contributed to Arthur's long term goal.

Almost a mythology has developed over aspects of the Line. Arthur distorted fact in insisting that Walpole's contact, and the presence of convicts with the Aborigines, led to the failure of his military objective. Without recognising the temper of the times, and that the Line was Arthur's only remaining military option, the 'fiasco' school of writers has unfairly branded the Black Line as a foolish enterprise. Historians' statements of numbers deployed on the line vary considerably, a minor, but pertinent example of how an error can develop by uncritical acceptance of one primary source.

The counter-insurgency campaign in the police districts and on the Black Line, while being a minor footnote in the annals of the British Army, is a significant but often misunderstood or forgotten phase of Tasmanian history. It deserves more recognition by Tasmanian and Australian military historians.