



Trouble in the Balkans

The Royal Australian Navy in Yugoslavia

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During the period 1992-2011 an estimated 150 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel served in one of the most bitter and brutal conflicts of the late 20th Century.¹ The collapse of Yugoslavia from mid-1991 onwards saw that nation descend into the depths of destruction and violence. Only external intervention from the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) eventually halted the bloodshed.

For those Australians who served in the Balkans, many on exchange service with British forces, the destruction and wanton killing undertaken by the opposing former Yugoslavian states was often beyond their comprehension. The ADF personnel involved all played their small part in finally bringing peace to the Balkans after nearly two decades of bitter fighting.

The nation of Yugoslavia (South Slavic Land) was created in 1918 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes following the end of World War I and the dismemberment of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The official name of the state was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. In April 1941 Yugoslavia was invaded by Nazi Germany as part of the German campaign to assist Italian forces fighting in Albania and Greece.

For the next four years the country was controlled by German forces. Communist partisans opposed the Nazi regime and at the end of the war, in 1945, Yugoslavia became a

communist state (The Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia; and, from 1963, The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) led by Marshal Josip Broz Tito. The country was effectively a complex balance of six semi-autonomous states; Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia and Montenegro. Under Tito's tight control, ethnic tensions and religious differences, which were many, were largely kept in check.



The states of the Former Yugoslavia

The 1980s proved a watershed period for the nation. Tito died on 4 May 1980 and, with an already weakened economy, Yugoslavia began to slowly collapse. The next ten years saw ethnic and religious tensions increase and in mid-1991 Slovenia declared its independence. This was followed soon after by conflict between Croatia and Serbia in 1991-1992, and in April 1992 a three way conflict broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina between Serb, Croat and Muslim forces which continued until 1995.



Essentially by mid-1995 Yugoslavia had ceased to exist and had broken up into separate states based on ethnic and religious lines. The fighting throughout the area was particularly brutal and acts of genocide were widespread. Eventually in November 1995 the Dayton Peace Accords and the Edrut Agreement formally ended the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and allowed a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Implementation Force (IFOR), and later a Stabilisation Force (SFOR), to enter the country. At its peak SFOR had 31,000 troops deployed in the region.



The Type 42 destroyer HMS Glasgow en route to the Adriatic. (Photo Stephen Duffy)

The first two members of the RAN to serve on operations in the region were Lieutenant Stephen Duffy, RAN, serving on exchange with the Royal Navy (RN) in the Type 42 destroyer HMS Glasgow, and Lieutenant John Alexander, RAN, also serving on exchange with the RN, in a Type 21 class frigate. They saw service in the Adriatic Sea during 1992 and, unlike the Falklands War of 1982 that saw RAN exchange personnel removed from RN ships deploying for Operation CORPORATE, the Australian Government saw no need to remove these officers from their

ships noting the international nature of the forces involved.

Lieutenant Duffy recalled that *Glasgow* sailed from the United Kingdom on 6 March 1992 for routine service with the NATO Standing Naval Force Mediterranean. The destroyer commenced Adriatic Sea patrols on 1 April (under British operational control) but on 30 April came under NATO operational control following the outbreak of fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Glasgow* conducted 'show of force' patrols in the Adriatic Sea and off the Yugoslavian coast, and escorted civilian vessels bringing in medical and relief supplies. She was also on stand-by to undertake 'contingency operations' as directed.



Lieutenant Stephen Duffy, RAN, serving on board HMS Glasgow while on exchange duty with the Royal Navy. (Photo Stephen Duffy)

Lieutenant Duffy also stated "We did witness action aimed at Dubrovnik and other coastal towns (mostly artillery) and were not certain who, if anyone, had their hands on any missile or rockets systems that could target ships". The destroyer ceased duties in the Adriatic on 24 June 1992.ⁱⁱ

NATO conducted three maritime operations during 1992-1996. These were Operation MARITIME MONITOR (16 June 1992 – 22 November 1992), Operation MARITIME



GUARD (22 November 1992 – 14 June 1993) and Operation SHARP GUARD (15 June 1993 – 19 June 1996). All were effectively blockades of the Adriatic to prevent the importation of weapons, ammunition and other contraband into the former Yugoslavia which could then be used by combatants to conduct operations.

Additionally UN Security Council Resolution 776 of 14 September 1992 authorised the deployment of UN forces to Bosnia and Herzegovina from October 1992 until December 1995 as part of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). The United Kingdom enacted Operation GRAPPLE and deployed sea, land and air units as part of UNPROFOR.



The frigate HMS Brazen in the Adriatic Sea 1993. (Photo Royal Navy)

Two members of the RAN, then serving on exchange with the RN, were deployed to the Adriatic Sea during this period. They were Lieutenant John Hunt in the frigate HMS *Andromeda* and Lieutenant Philip Spedding in the frigate HMS *Brazen*. Spedding later recalled that *Brazen* departed the United Kingdom in January 1993 and undertook two 40 day patrols in the Adriatic, with a short port visit in between, conducting intelligence collection in the vicinity of various ports and airfields.ⁱⁱⁱ *Brazen* also conducted escort duties

for the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, and Royal Fleet Auxiliaries *Argus* and *Olna*. *Argus* had more than 350 troops embarked, as well as artillery and vehicles, and was on stand-by to reinforce UNPROFOR from the port of Split if required.^{iv}

Lieutenant Commander William Thorpe, RAN, served on exchange with the RAF during 1995-98, including a period as aircrew in an E-3D Sentry airborne warning and control aircraft operating in the former Yugoslavia in late 1996.^v

In early 1997 RAN personnel returned for service in the former Yugoslavia as part of the (NATO) Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR) that operated from late 1996 until late 2004. The NATO operations during this period were Operation JOINT GUARD (1996-1998) and Operation JOINT FORGE (1998-2004). Over 40 nations, including non-NATO nations such as Australia and New Zealand, deployed personnel to the region.

The Australian Government authorised the deployment of six ADF officers to serve on six month rotations with SFOR from March 1997 under the Australian named Operation OSIER. There was no ADF Operation name prior to this and Australians serving in the region did so while attached to British units.

Eventually three RAN Lieutenants were to serve as the Staff Officer Grade 3 (Media Operations) based at Banja Luka. Lieutenant Mark Croxford, RAN, was the first to arrive along with four army officers and a RAAF civil engineer.

After arriving at the Croatian port of Split, where two of the army officers were attached to a British headquarters, Lieutenant Croxford



and the others then undertook an eight hour road journey to Banja Luka.



A war damaged building in the town of Drvar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Photo Kirk Hayden)

Lieutenant Croxford described this as *“taking us through the most spectacular countryside the Balkans has to offer. Undulating valleys, rugged mountain ranges, gorges, snow, villages and cities. Unfortunately many of these areas bore the scars of the war that raged for years. It didn’t take long to gauge the extent of the ‘ethnic cleansing’ that occurred during the war. Many of the villages along the route had been totally destroyed and remain as ghostly shells.”*^{vi}

Lieutenant Croxford spent six months working in the Multi-National Division Headquarters initially supervising the production the multi-lingual SFOR news sheet *Mostovi* (Bridges) for the local population. He then became the public relations advisor to the command and media liaison officer for local, regional and international media.

This was a busy time as SFOR detained two men indicted for war crimes and Bosnian Croats attempted to prevent the return of Bosnian Muslims to the Jajce region in central

Bosnia. Then to make matters worse just prior to the Municipal Elections in September, a group of hard-line Bosnian Serbs attempted to seize control of Banja Luka but were stopped by angry locals and SFOR troops.

In September 1997 Lieutenant Jo Bastian, RAN, took over from Lieutenant Croxford as a public relations adviser and media liaison officer. One of her tasks was overseeing all media interviews given by SFOR spokespersons to ensure they remained ‘on message.’



SFOR Headquarters at Banja Luka. The dark green containers are the Corimec accommodation modules used for officer accommodation. Junior officers shared accommodation; however, the toilets and showers were in other containers some 300 metres away. (Photo Kirk Hayden)

Lieutenant Bastian undertook force preparation training in Australia during late August 1997 before heading to the United Kingdom for NATO training courses at Warminster. She then deployed to the Balkans arriving in Split in mid-September. She also served at Banja Luka arranging the weekly press conferences, media attendance at NATO Briefings, liaison with the local media (radio, print and television) as well as



monitoring the output from the local media to ascertain if there were issues that needed to be brought to the attention of senior NATO officers.^{vii}



Lieutenant Jo Bastian, RAN, observing NATO field exercises while serving in Bosnia in late 1997. (Photo Jo Bastian)

Another activity that Lieutenant Bastian dealt with was the media issues surrounding the NATO handling of Persons Indicted for War Crimes (PIWC). This was a highly sensitive activity requiring much tact, discretion and appropriate media messaging. Lieutenant Bastian also travelled extensively throughout the former Yugoslavia as part of the entourage for senior officers and visiting dignitaries such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair. She handed over her duties to an Australian Army officer in early March 1998 and before returning to Australia.

In February 1998 fighting broke out in the Serbian province of Kosovo between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (consisting of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro) which controlled the area and the local population who were predominantly ethnic Albanians. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had been conducting a low level campaign for independence since 1995 but in

1998 the intensity increased following the ready availability of arms and ammunition looted from Albania following a rebellion in that country.

Serbian regular forces and para-military personnel commenced a systematic campaign against the KLA, and its sympathisers, resulting in many deaths and the brutal treatment of Albanian Kosovars. When a diplomatic solution failed NATO intervened with a bombing campaign of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Operation ALLIED FORCE) during March – June 1999 to bring about an end to hostilities.^{viii} Over one million Kosovars were driven out of their homes by the Serbian Army becoming 'displaced persons' and ending up in various refugee camps.



The SFOR Media Officers frequently saw the worst of the destruction throughout the Former Yugoslavia. Here an elderly woman surveys what is left of her once thriving village. (Photo Kirk Hayden)

In early May 1999 the first of 4,000 Kosovars arrived in Australia on temporary 'Safe Haven' visas. The United Nations requested several countries provide temporary safe havens for these refugees and Australia was one of the many countries that accepted the displaced



Kosovars. In late July 1999 the UN assessed that it was safe for the Kosovars to return home and the majority of those in Australia returned willingly to Kosovo. An estimated 500 remained in Australia and were granted visas to remain.

During 1998-2000 Lieutenant Commander Nick Woodley, RAN, was serving on exchange with the RN in the destroyer HMS Newcastle. The destroyer had been operating in the Northern Arabian Gulf as escort for the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*. In April 1999 the two ships were returning to the United Kingdom when they were diverted to the Adriatic Sea for possible combat operations against Serbia, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia as part of Operation ALLIED FORCE.



HMS Newcastle in the Adriatic Sea 1999.
(Photo Royal Navy)

Lieutenant Commander Woodley recalled: *“In mid-April 1999 we arrived on station and remained there for approximately two months. We were assigned air defence sectors in both the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, and swapped between the two depending on where the carriers were conducting their flight operations. There were quite a number of carriers (10+) involved so destroyers were in high demand for carrier protection against*

Serbian Air Force strikes. “We were also periodically assigned to escort frigates that were conducting anti-submarine warfare operations close inshore around a couple of Montenegrin ports. In terms of the air warfare tasking, it was particularly busy in the early stages as the NATO forces amassed an incredibly large number of aircraft which would form up over Italy and then conduct massed air strikes mostly into Serbia.

“Our task was to track these raids both into Serbia, but more importantly as the NATO aircraft returned to base as a Serbian Air Force tactic was to try and hide fighter-bombers in these returning formations so they could attack NATO maritime assets in the Adriatic; it was quite a busy time.”^{ix}

In January 2000 Lieutenant Kirk Hayden, RAN, commenced in the public relations role previously performed by Lieutenant Bastian.



Street scene in Sarajevo in early 2000 as people go about their daily business. The photo was taken not far from where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914; a reminder of this region’s troubled past.
(Photo Kirk Hayden)

During his six-month deployment Lieutenant Hayden was part of the British Public Affairs team located at Banja Luka and frequently



travelled to areas greatly affected by the fighting. While working at the NATO camp at Sarajevo in winter he recalled *“we would walk along well-worn tracks in the camp due to the risk of mines, but a few months later after the ground had thawed some mines surfaced along these routes. A very sobering thought.”* x

Additionally, as a public affairs officer, he had regular contact with the local population who were very friendly and saw the important role that SFOR had in bringing safety and stability back in to their lives. Lieutenant Hayden was replaced by an Australian Army officer in mid-2000.



Lieutenant Kirk Hayden, RAN, at the Marshal Tito Memorial, overlooking Banja Luka. (Photo Kirk Hayden)

Four RAN aircrew served in the Former Yugoslavia during the period 1998-1999 while on exchange service with the RN. They all

served with 845 Squadron (known fondly as the ‘Junglies’ for their service during the 1960s where they inserted Royal Marines into the jungles of Malaysia during Confrontation in 1964-66).



RAN aircrew generally flew the ‘striped’ SFOR Sea King in the Former Yugoslavia. This aircraft can be seen flying over a burned out village in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(Photo Brad Mackay)

Lieutenant Adrian ‘Crappers’ Capner, RAN, deployed twice to the area in January – February 1999 and November – December 1999 as part of the UK Multinational Division Incident Response Team. Adrian stated: *“We normally flew with an aircrewman and a medic but depending on the tasking were augmented with a fire fighting team (for vehicle extraction), an army mine disposal unit or additional medical staff depending on the task.*

“We remained on notice to conduct Aero Medical Evacuation and were frequently sent out when there had been a vehicle accident, which, due to the appalling road and weather conditions, were frequent. If the vehicle went off the road the mine disposal team was



required as the whole country was considered a mine hazard.

“While maintaining that readiness notice we would also conduct movement of personnel, especially VIPs, and stores/mail runs. It remains one of my most rewarding jobs. I learnt a lot while actually helping people and flew in very interesting and challenging conditions.”^{xi}



Lieutenant Brad Mackay while deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Royal Navy’s 845 Squadron. (Photo Brad Mackay)

Lieutenant Brad Mackay, RAN, also flew with 845 Squadron and deployed to the region four times; January - February 1999, May - July 1999, February - April 2000 and October 2000. Describing his deployments as ‘*outstanding operation flying*’ the squadron had its main maintenance base at Trogir (on the Croatian coast) and would normally rotate an aircraft ‘up country’ to Sipovo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) for 3-5 days. The main mission was to support any troop lift, re-supply of stores and equipment, photo reconnaissance and conduct casualty evacuation as required.^{xii}

Lieutenant Angus Hawes, RAN, was the last known member of the RAN to serve in the former Yugoslavia while on exchange service with British forces during 2000 - 2001. He

served as an air intercept controller during Operation JOINT GUARDIAN which lasted from June 1999 - June 2004.



Recovery of damaged SFOR vehicles from the field was one of the many tasks undertaken by 845 Squadron helicopters. (Photo Brad Mackay)

In late 2004 SFOR, which had reduced its numbers to 7,000 personnel, was replaced by the European Union Force (EUFOR) under Operation ALTHEA to maintain peace and stability in the former Yugoslavia. By 2007 this force had been reduced to 1600 personnel and, as of 2019, has approximately 600 personnel in the region undertaking training and capacity building tasks with the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



The following members of the RAN are known to have served in the Former Yugoslavia (rank at time of service):

Lieutenant John Alexander (RN Exchange)

Lieutenant Jody Bastian (SFOR Media)

Lieutenant (Pilot) Adrian Capner (845 Squadron)

Lieutenant (Observer) Shane Craig (845 Squadron)

Lieutenant Mark Croxford (SFOR Media)

Lieutenant Stephen Duffy (RN Exchange)

Lieutenant Angus Hawes (Air Intercept Controller)

Lieutenant Kirk Hayden (SFOR Media)

Lieutenant John Hunt (RN Exchange)

Lieutenant (Pilot) Bradley MacKay (845 Squadron)

Lieutenant Philip Spedding (RN Exchange)

Lieutenant Commander William Thorpe (RAF Airborne Early Warning Aircraft)

Lieutenant Commander Nicholas Woodley (RN Exchange)

Lieutenant (Pilot) Peter Wynter (845 Squadron)

For service in the former Yugoslavia the Australian Government awarded the Australian Active Service Medal, with clasp 'Balkans' for those who served with the United Nations or NATO forces during the period 12 January 1992 – 24 January 1997. A single days' service in the prescribed area was required for the award of this medal. For service from 25 January 1997 onwards the

Australian Service Medal with clasp 'Balkans' was awarded for which a minimum of 30 days service was required. Those serving with NATO forces were also entitled to the NATO medal, generally with the clasp 'Former Yugoslavia', for 30 days service in the prescribed area.



The NATO medal awarded for service in the former Yugoslavia.

Other RAN personnel may have served briefly in the Former Yugoslavia, while attached to British forces during Exercise LONG LOOK (a three month exchange posting of ADF and British personnel), but not achieved the 30 days required for the issue of the Australian Service Medal.

The collapse and dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s revealed the fragility of the nation due to deep seated ethnic and religious tensions. The term 'ethnic cleansing' became synonymous with this protracted civil war and later saw a global hunt for those who undertook these heinous crimes. The role of the UN and NATO was often criticised as being too slow to act, yet it



was only through the actions of these two bodies that peace was finally brought to the Balkans.

Australia, and its Defence Force personnel, played its small part in bringing about this peace thus again proving that distance should not dictate inaction when evil prospers.

Further Reading:

Wesley C. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo and the future of Conflict*.

Sandra Doyle (Ed.), *You Cannot Surge Trust: Combined Naval Operations of the Royal Australian Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Navy and United States Navy – 1991-2003*.

Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War*.

David Horner & John Connor, *The Good International Citizen: Australian Peace-Keeping in Asia, Africa and Europe 1991 - 1993*.

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- i This number does not include several members of the British Armed Forces who served in the Former Yugoslavia and later joined the ADF.
 - ii Information and comment from Commander Stephen Duffy, RAN (Retired) May 2019.
 - iii David Horner & John Connor, *The Good International Citizen: Australian Peace-Keeping in Asia, Africa and Europe 1991-1993*, pages 368-369.
 - iv Comment by Commodore Philip Spedding, RAN (February 2018).
 - v Horner & Connor, *ibid*, page 368.
 - vi Mark Croxford, *The Quest for Peace in Bosnia, Australia's Navy 1998*, Department of Defence, Canberra 1998, pages 46-50.

- vii Information provided by Commander Jo Bastian, RAN (June 2019).
- viii The war ended with the signing of the Kumanov Treaty and Yugoslav and Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo. Fighting had also spilled over into the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia during 1999 where separate ethnic tensions were prevalent.
- ix Comment by Captain Nicholas Woodley, RAN (May 2019).
- x Comment by Commander Kirk Hayden, RAN (June 2019).
- xi Comment by Captain Adrian Capner, RAN (May 2019).
- xii Comment by Commander Brad Mackay, RAN (May 2019).