SEMAPHORE

THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY AND THE RESTORATION OF STABILITY IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

On the morning of 24 July 2003, the citizens of Honiara awoke to find a massive grey warship anchored close off shore; HMAS *Manoora*, a highly versatile amphibious transport had arrived to help restore law and order to the Solomon Islands. Unlike previous deployments to the region, *Manoora*'s presence was an unmistakable show of military strength, indicating to all observers that change for the Islands was imminent. *Manoora*'s appearance off Guadalcanal beach marked the beginning of Operation HELPEM FREN, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Australian Defence Force (ADF) participation in HELPEM FREN came under the banner of Operation ANODE, and continued a long tradition of positive involvement by Australian and Australian-based naval vessels in the development of the Solomon Islands.[1]

HMAS *Manoora dubbed 'Bikfala Sip' by the Islanders*.

Operation HELPEM FREN was preceded by a great deal of local unrest. In 1998, simmering tensions on Guadalcanal broke out into conflict between the indigenous inhabitants and ethnic Malaitans. Flowing from resentment of the growing political and financial power of the Malaitans, the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (later the Isatabu Freedom Movement or IFM) was formed to redress the perceived power imbalance. The IFM raided police armouries, intimidated local businesses and forced nearly 20,000 Malaitans from their homes. The Malaitans responded to this threat by forming the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), which had strong ties with the local police force. On 5 June 2000, the MEF, along with paramilitary elements of the police, deposed the Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, and facilitated the installation of a new government headed by Manasseh Sogavare. Although the MEF and IFM signed a peace treaty in October 2000, thousands of high-powered weapons remained in the community, increasing the lawlessness that had swept the nation. Equally destabilising, the conflict had resulted in the widespread damage and destruction of local

infrastructure, severely restricting the Government's ability to provide key services.[2] The situation continued to deteriorate, until by February 2003 the Solomon Islands was being publicly labelled 'the Pacific's first failed state'.[3] Facing complete collapse, and fully aware that it could not restore law and order without external assistance, the Government sought help from Australia and other regional nations. Created by the Pacific Islands Forum in response to this request, RAMSI's aim was 'to uphold the laws of the Solomon Islands and assist the Solomon Islands' Government and people restore stability in their country'.[4]

Eight nations contributed to RAMSI's police and military forces: Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati and the Cook Islands. In the initial deployment of 2225 personnel, Australia sent 1745 personnel, of whom 1500 belonged to the ADF.[5] Royal Australian Navy (RAN) personnel formed a significant proportion of the ADF contribution. Apart from *Manoora*, the patrol boat HMAS *Whyalla*, the heavy landing craft HMA ships *Wewak* and *Labuan*, and the coastal minehunter HMAS *Hawkesbury* were sent to the area of operations. Following the initial deployment, two RAN vessels were generally maintained on station, and by the end of ANODE, 19 Australian warships had taken part. The last of these, the patrol boat HMAS *Fremantle*, sailed for home in October 2004.

Despite the RAN's many previous missions to the Solomons, Operation ANODE was unique in that the Navy's primary role was to support and facilitate the work of the Participating Police Force (PPF). Moreover, in addition to being the first time that the RAN had supported a police-led mission,[6] the operation was unusual in that its leader, Nick Warner, was a civilian from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade. Notwithstanding this whole-of-government involvement, the eventual success of RAMSI would still owe much to naval participation.

Following the establishment of a permanent and secure RAMSI presence in Honiara, one of the PPF's primary objectives was to establish and sustain police outposts throughout the scattered Solomon Islands. With support facilities extremely scarce, the task would have proved impossible without the sea and airlift capability provided by *Manoora*, her two embarked Sea King helicopters and the activities of the hard-worked heavy landing craft. Yet, although the provision of logistic support to the PPF was essential, RAN units also played an important part in establishing RAMSI's authority. It is doubtful that the PPF could have returned law and order to the Solomons as quickly as it did without RAMSI's ability to deploy overwhelming military force if its members were

threatened. As Nick Warner remarked of RAMSI's accomplishments:

> [A] very important factor was the very large military force deployed; at its peak we had 2000 military, one major and five small war vessels and eight helicopters and a couple of Caribou. That got the attention of the people! [7]

The creation of a seemingly ubiquitous and strong military presence was relatively routine for naval units. Self-deployable and inherently mobile, Australian warships could appear almost anywhere without warning. The situation was far less simple for other deployed forces. In the initial phase of the operation every PPF officer needed to be accompanied by approximately 50 military personnel.[8] Given the remoteness of many police outposts, this requirement presented something of a logistics challenge. Hence, extensive cooperation between the RAN and other ADF elements was essential throughout, particularly with respect to the transport of heavy equipment, stores and personnel within the area of operations.

The RAN's diplomatic contribution to Operation ANODE was on par with its military undertakings. RAMSI's critics openly questioned its legitimacy, and the most taxing diplomatic goal was to win Islander support. The basis of RAMSI's response was better education, and public displays of equipment proved particularly effective in generating a positive message. In August 2003, *Wewak* and a helicopter from *Manoora* were opened to the public in Honiara. The estimated 10,000 people that visited the displays not only demonstrated the intensity of local interest, but also allowed for face-to-face discussions with the public, and provided an important measure of how the Islanders perceived RAMSI's efforts.

As visits to many remote villages were only feasible by sea, RAN vessels also played a crucial role in spreading the message as widely as possible. Particularly threatening to the ready restoration of law and order were the thousands of weapons still held within the community. Informing locals on the benefits of the RAMSI weapons amnesty, and the penalties for those planning to withhold weapons became critical to reducing this threat. During their first two-month deployments, both *Whyalla* and *Hawkesbury* collected over 300 military weapons and a large amount of ammunition. Wherever RAN vessels visited, the provision of small gifts (chocolate and toy koalas proved immensely popular) helped to win the hearts and minds of communities. More important still was the ability of the RAN to make use of the variety of professional skills possessed by its specialist sailors. Humanitarian efforts ranged from disaster relief through to explosive ordnance disposal.[9] Building on the Navy's long experience of operating in the South Pacific, direct assistance to the community became the defining feature of the RAN's involvement.

In December 2003, for example, *Wewak* carried 90 tonnes of relief supplies to the residents of Tikopia and Anuta who were facing starvation after a cyclone. *Hawkesbury*, meanwhile, rescued six men whose canoe had capsized in heavy seas, while simultaneously transporting a sick child to Ghizo hospital. In a similar vein, the crews of a succession of RAN vessels helped a hospital on the island of Taro resume full services. In January 2004, HMAS *Wollongong* repaired the hospital's damaged generator. Later, crew from HMA Ships *Yarra* and *Geelong* repaired and replaced all the hospital's electrical wiring. An ability to repair damaged infrastructure was also demonstrated by HMAS *Gascoyne* at Falamai in the Treasury Island Group. By fixing the village tractor, the minehunter's crew not only fostered goodwill, but also helped revive the local agricultural industry.

Before the mission, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Hon. Alexander Downer MP had emphasised that returning civil order to the Solomons would be useless unless steps were taken to revive the economy.[10] For many years, the RAN has had Maritime Surveillance Advisers in place throughout the South Pacific. In 2003 and 2004, the RAN extended this assistance to provide a continuous program of active patrols throughout the Solomon Islands' huge exclusive economic zone (its EEZ is 390,686 nm² in area). These patrols regularly prevented the exploitation of local marine resources by the many foreign fishing vessels frequenting these waters. RAN personnel also provided additional professional training to the crews of the Solomon Islands' two Pacific Class patrol boats, ensuring that the Islanders regained the ability to maintain their EEZ.

While still carrying out its primary role of facilitating the work of the PPF, the RAN performed a far wider range of operations than might at first be evident. The professional, flexible and sympathetic manner in which the RAN's men and women undertook these tasks fostered strong ties with the citizens of the Solomon Islands and better encouraged local compliance with RAMSI initiatives. As such, the naval role in Operation ANODE provides yet another case study in the measured application of sea power and offers lessons that will remain relevant for future deployments in regional trouble spots.

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[1] See, 'Australian Operations in the Solomon Islands', in G. Kerr, ed., *Australian Maritime Issues 2004: SPC-A Annual,* Sea Power Centre-Australia, Canberra, 2004, pp. 53-57.

[2] J. Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands*, Pandanus Books, Wellington, 2004, p. 8.

[3] 'Solomon Islands: The Pacific's First Failed State', *Economist*, 13 February 2003, cited in Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom*, p. 8.

[4] G. Davies, 'HELPEM FREN Op Kicks in', *Navy News*, 31 July 2003.

[5] This total included 1500 ADF members, 155 Australian Federal Police and 90 Australian Protective Service personnel; see G. Davies, 'HELPEM FREN OP Kicks in, *Navy News*, 31 July 2003.

[6] C. Woods, 'Bikfala Sip: Aussies Come to Help our Pacific Friends', *Navy News*, 14 August 2003.

[7] R. Keith-Reid, 'So What Now for the Solomon Islands? 2004 will be a Year of Reconstruction', *Pacific Magazine,* January 2003.

[8] S. Hawke, 'Together as One' *Army*, 28 August 2003.

[9] In mid-2004, sailors from HMAS *Diamantina* noticed a child playing with what appeared to be a ball. On closer inspection, the object was found to be a pineapple style grenade with the cocking handle missing! Apart from destroying the grenade, *Diamantina* disposed of another two 250lb bombs and an unidentified projectile on the island of Taro.

[10] A. Downer, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, <foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2003/ 030610_solomonislands.html> (10 June 2003).