

OFFSHORE AND OUT OF SIGHT: THE RAN IN THE NORTH ARABIAN GULF

Recent media discussion regarding the role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in Iraq has tended to focus on the departure of our combat troops from the Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar Provinces in the south of the country.¹ But this does not mark the end of Australia's military commitment, as just under 1000 personnel will continue to support Operation CATALYST, the ADF's contribution to developing a secure and stable environment in Iraq, and assist in national recovery programs. Although one of the least publicised aspects, the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) role in the North Arabian Gulf (NAG) as part of Combined Task Force 158 (CTF 158) remains one of the most important components of this ongoing commitment.²

The exact composition of CTF 158 varies, but generally comprises eight ships, drawn from the RAN (currently HMAS *Stuart*), the United States (US) Navy, the United States Coast Guard, the Royal Navy and the Iraqi Navy, and anywhere from 800-1300 personnel.³ The activities of CTF 158 take place offshore and out of sight, both literally and figuratively, yet its core mission is critical: protecting the vital oil terminals and infrastructure through which flows the oil which earns over 90 per cent of Iraq's foreign exchange. The strategic and economic importance of these assets is clear. Without the income from oil exports, Iraq's national stability would be further compromised, the situation throughout the country would be significantly worse than it is today, and prospects for improvement would be dubious. The CTF 158 mission is thus easily recognised as one of the most crucial allied operations in support of the rehabilitation of Iraq, but at the same time it is probably the least understood.

Stuart's arrival in the Gulf in April 2008 marks the 40th separate RAN ship deployment to the region since Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and thereby represents the ADF's most significant long-term investment in the Middle East. The first RAN deployment consisted of three ships (HMA Ships *Adelaide*, *Darwin* and *Success*) which sailed from Sydney, with just 72 hours notice. The despatch of this task group, the core Australian response to the invasion, was a perfect demonstration of the readiness, flexibility, reach and responsiveness of maritime forces. Despite an initial degree of uncertainty over the task group's tasking, many years of experience operating with our allies and a common doctrinal understanding enabled the initial *ad hoc* coalition to work together very effectively. The RAN thereafter remained engaged throughout Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, providing escort and logistic support during combat operations to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

For the next decade the RAN maintained a regular, though not continuous, presence under Operation DAMASK, forming part of the Multinational Interception Force which maintained United Nations sanctions on Iraq as part of the ceasefire arrangements. This maritime embargo proved extremely effective in controlling the flow of prohibited goods into and out of Iraq and denying Saddam Hussein

the ability to re-equip or effectively train his military. The success of the sanctions only became fully apparent when Operation IRAQI FREEDOM began in March 2003, with Iraq's conventional military forces crumbling far quicker than most analysts expected.

HMAS *Anzac* was in the region as part of DAMASK X (the tenth rotation of RAN ships) when the United States was attacked on 11 September 2001. Her deployment was immediately extended and the RAN has since maintained a continuous presence of between one and three ships in the Gulf. Prior to the start of hostilities in 2003 the RAN was directly involved in enforcement operations, dealing with a very dynamic situation and facing a range of asymmetric and conventional threats. Obviously, the naval role has changed considerably over time, but the flexible nature of maritime forces, particularly surface warships, allowed the same RAN units to adapt to meet all emerging challenges.



HMAS Anzac on patrol off Iraq's KAAOT in late 2007
(US Navy)

Anzac was back in the Gulf along with HMA Ships *Kanimbla* and *Darwin* when the 2003 Iraq War began. At that stage Captain Peter Jones, RAN, commanded the multinational interception operations in the NAG and had under his control ships from Australia, the US, the United Kingdom and Poland. Captain Jones led the forces during their transition from a boarding and inspection focus to combat operations.

These three RAN ships, together with Australian Clearance Diving Team 3, were key elements in the Coalition effort to gain and maintain security of the NAG and the Khawr Abd Allah waterway providing access to the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr. They provided naval gunfire support to the Royal Marine assault on the Al Faw Peninsula, thwarted a covert Iraqi attempt to mine the NAG, cleared the port area of unexploded ordnance, discovered a major weapons cache, and dealt with the threat of surface, sub-surface and missile attacks. The major objective was to open up Umm Qasr to the flow of humanitarian aid. This objective was met just 10 days into the campaign when the first Coalition logistic ship berthed in the re-opened port. Throughout the combat phase, RAN ships were operating as far north in the Gulf as they could, usually in constrained navigational circumstances and well inside Iraqi territorial waters.

Upon completion of hostilities RAN forces transitioned seamlessly from combat operations to working with the new Iraqi regime to ensure the security of the nation's maritime interests, thereby helping to establish the environment necessary for re-building and recovery. Today, CTF 158 continues this vital work with a wide ranging remit: to set the conditions for security in the NAG; to help build the new Iraqi Navy's capabilities and experience level to allow them to assume control; and, to protect key infrastructure critical to Iraq's economic development. Command of the Task Force has been regularly rotated between Australia, the US and the United Kingdom in a well practiced and very effective manner. Commodore Allan du Toit, RAN, was the most recent Australian naval representative, remaining in theatre from September 2007 until March 2008 when he handed over command to the Royal Navy.

As already noted, one of the most important of CTF 158's tasks is the protection of the Khawr al Amayah and Al Basrah oil terminals - usually referred to as KAAOT and ABOT respectively. These terminals are located in Iraqi waters about 15km south of the Al Faw Peninsula. They are fed via an underwater pipeline from a pumping station on the peninsula's tip. While the strategic importance of keeping the oil flowing is clear to the new Iraqi regime, it is just as well understood by insurgent forces. The terminals have already been subject to both deliberate terrorist attack and accidents, with consequent loss of earnings for the Iraqi economy. Although unsuccessful, a coordinated sea-borne terrorist attack on 24 April 2004 led to a two-day shut down of the facilities with a direct cost to Iraq of some US\$28 million. Even more significant to world markets, the attack caused the price of oil to spike resulting in a further loss to the global economy estimated to be at least US\$6 billion. Subsequently, the existing two mile security zone around KAAOT and ABOT was supplemented with a 3000 metre warning zone and a 2000 metre exclusion zone.⁴

The RAN's deployed ships, officers and sailors have been intimately involved with enforcing these security measures. Indeed, during the 2004 attack *Stuart* was acting as the Maritime Security Operations Commander in the NAG. The incident began when a boarding party from USS *Firebolt*, a patrol vessel under *Stuart's* control, investigated one of the numerous dhows which had entered the security zone that day. As the boarding party approached the dhow to warn it to stay away, its occupants detonated an explosive device, killing three members of the US Navy boarding party and seriously injuring a further four. Within minutes another two small boat attacks were successfully thwarted by Iraqi security detachments on the oil terminals. *Stuart's* helicopter was first on the scene and her command team coordinated the response and managed the subsequent rescue and evacuation operations.

A critical point to note is that hundreds of fishing and trading vessels routinely operate in the area surrounding the oil terminals. It is only through continued presence and active patrolling that Coalition maritime forces can build and maintain a high degree of situational awareness and an understanding of normal traffic patterns. It is this knowledge which allows deviations from the norm to be detected early and appropriate reactions taken. This work is time consuming, constant and generally conducted without fanfare - but it is absolutely essential. While the *Firebolt* casualties in the frustrated attack were tragic, the layered

defence and quick and decisive response by Coalition forces ensured the primary target - the oil terminals - were not damaged.

CTF 158 has also been very successful in helping to train the Iraqi Navy to enforce national sovereignty in their coastal waters. The Iraqis have been equipped with new patrol boats and, despite starting from a very low skill level, have made significant progress in the development of their maritime professionalism and capabilities. A naval mentoring program is also underway allowing Iraqi officers to gain exposure to operations from a frigate-size ship, and enabling them to further broaden their experience base.

The constant vigilance of the maritime forces assigned to CTF 158 has ensured the protection of the single most important element of Iraq's economic infrastructure. This does not in any way downplay the extreme difficulties faced by the Coalition's land forces who have suffered a much higher casualty rate. However, it is important to appreciate how challenging the overall situation would be without the foreign currency earned by the oil exports from KAAOT and ABOT. The professionalism and awareness of the Coalition's maritime forces, and their readiness to react to any developing situation, continues to be instrumental in allowing for the further development of Iraq's oil exporting industry and preparing the Iraqi Navy for the day when it will assume full security responsibilities. Thus despite the recent withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq, Australia continues to demonstrate its support for friends and allies in the Middle East. This includes a valuable RAN presence.



Commodore Allan du Toit while in command of CTF 158 (Defence)

- 1 Department of Defence Media Release CP155/08, 'Diggers cease operations in Southern Iraq', 2 June 2008, <www.defence.gov.au/media/DepartmentalTpl.cfm?CurrentId=7803> (4 June 2008).
- 2 Department of Defence web page 'About Operation Catalyst', <www.defence.gov.au/opcatalyst> (4 June 2008).
- 3 See the Royal Navy's web page 'Combined Task Force 158' at <www.royalnavy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.00h00400100500700e002> (4 June 2008).
- 4 JC Daly, 'The Threat to Iraqi Oil', *Terrorism Monitor* vol. 2, issue 12, 17 June 2004. Navy Newsstand, *Coalition Maritime Forces Revise Iraqi Oil Terminal Protection Procedures*, Story Number NNS040506-08, 6 May 2004, <www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=13177> (28 September 2007); and *Warning and Exclusion Zones at Khawr Al'Amaya Oil Terminal (KAAOT) and Al Basra Oil terminal (ABOT)*, US Maritime Liaison Office, Bahrain, 6 May 2004.

