SEMAPHORE

THE *DUBAI PRINCESS* AND THE PIRATES

On 29 May 2009 the Australian Government announced a decision to flexibly task the Australian Navy frigate deployed in the Middle East Area of Operations between anti-piracy operations and their existing counter-terrorism and maritime security patrols under Operation SLIPPER.[1] Formed primarily to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden, Task Force 151 (currently commanded by Turkish Rear Admiral Caner Bener) is one of three task groups operating as part of the Coalition Maritime Forces (CMF), a multi-national organisation co-located with the United States (US) Navy's Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain. The Commander CMF (Vice Admiral Bill Gortney, USN), is also the US Commander Fifth Fleet and has a Royal Navy commodore permanently posted as his Deputy CMF Commander. Nations contributing to the CMF include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Singapore, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Pakistan and Greece.

There has been a regular Royal Australian Navy (RAN) presence in the Arabian Gulf since the 1990-91 Gulf War; working primarily in and around Iraqi territorial waters. But with the expiration of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1790 on 31 December 2008, the Australian government re-deployed the ship away from Iraqi waters to operations elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf. [2]

Like all navies, the RAN is bound under the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982* to suppress piracy wherever it may occur. On 17 May 2009 two RAN frigates, HMA Ships *Sydney* and *Ballarat* were transiting through the Gulf of Aden on their way to the Red Sea. The ships were deployed as part of NORTHERN TRIDENT 09, a global deployment to conduct a range of exercises with many navies around the world, and supporting the diplomatic role that navies are so valuable in executing: they were not in the region specifically for anti-piracy operations. Given the prevalence of piracy around Somalia and the Horn of Africa, however, they had established communications with CMF Headquarters in Bahrain and worked through some possible scenarios should piracy be encountered. The RAN's longstanding commitment to the Gulf region, coupled with regular exercises with the US Navy and other key allies meant that it was relatively easy for *Sydney* and *Ballarat* to be force assigned to Chief of Joint Operations (Australia) to act in support of the Combined Force Maritime Component Command counter piracy efforts while transiting the area.

One of the most successful ways to combat piracy is through presence, leading to deterrence. Pirates are generally motivated by money and will pick easy targets, so the presence of a warship is often enough for them to abort any attempted attack and seek easier prey. To capitalise on this, an 'internationally recognised transit corridor' has been established through the Gulf of Aden. Warships regularly patrol along this 'corridor', which is used by most merchant ships so that, if required, help is relatively close at hand. It was through this corridor that *Sydney* and *Ballarat* travelled.

The pirates armed and ready to board
(Emarat Maritime Dubai)

At 1116 local time on 17 May 2009 *Sydney* and *Ballarat* heard a radio call for help on the international distress frequency from the oil tanker MV *Dubai Princess*, under Captain Syed MA Naqvi, stating that she was under attack by pirates and requesting assistance. Sydney established communications and quickly determined that *Dubai Princess* was 20 nautical miles (nm) ahead, travelling in the same direction. Both warships increased to maximum speed and *Sydney* prepared to launch her Seahawk helicopter. *Sydney* recommended that *Dubai Princess* reverse her course to reduce the time to close, but the ship's Master was initially reluctant, as the pirate skiffs (see picture) were astern of him.

The 115,500 dead weight tonne tanker
MV Dubai Princess *spraying water in an attempt to prevent pirates boarding* (RAN)

At 1140 *Dubai Princess* reported that she was being fired upon by small arms and rocket propelled grenades, so *Sydney* and *Ballarat* went to Action Stations and *Sydney*'s helicopter was launched as soon as it was ready. Although the pirates made numerous boarding attempts they were unsuccessful due to the self-protection measures adopted by the tanker's crew. Captain Naqvi then attempted to reverse course, but he was at full power and the heavy manoeuvring was straining his engines -

Sydney's bridge staff could hear engineering alarms sounding in the background when *Dubai Princess* transmitted on radio.

By 1210 *Sydney* sighted the skiffs which appeared to disengage from *Dubai Princess* once they saw two warships approaching at speed. One skiff closed on *Sydney* initially, but then stopped and waved a white flag and a jerry (fuel) can, trying to show that they meant no harm and needed fuel. *Sydney* continued closing on *Dubai Princess* and by 1220 had established a position off her port quarter with the aim of remaining there while she continued her transit west. The initial plan had *Ballarat* close to the starboard quarter, but at 1227 a second vessel, MV *MSC Stella*, 6nm east (ie. behind) and travelling in the same direction, reported that she now had a skiff approaching her. *Ballarat* closed on *MSC Stella* to provide her with the same level of escort that *Sydney* was providing to *Dubai Princess*.

HMAS Sydney *approaches one of the pirate skiffs*
(Emarat Maritime Dubai)

Soon afterwards, *Sydney*'s helicopter reported a possible pirate mother ship a further 20nm east and was tasked to investigate further. With *Dubai Princess* now apparently clear of danger, and *MSC Stella* reasonably close, *Ballarat* was tasked to escort both ships as they cleared the danger area to the west, while *Sydney*, with her greater speed, reversed course and closed on the possible mother ship. *Sydney* steamed back past the original skiff and those onboard were again seen waving fuel cans in the air. The skiff's position was recorded and *Sydney* continued to close on the suspected mother ship, which turned out to be another large skiff with fuel tanks visible on her deck. While these tanks were possibly for fuel storage, there was no other direct evidence linking her to the attacking skiffs.

At 1345 *Dubai Princess* and *MSC Stella* were now well clear of possible danger, so *Ballarat* reversed course to join the next group of six merchant ships that were sailing west down the transit corridor as a close escort. At one stage the second of these ships reported a skiff closing, but it quickly turned away with *Ballarat*'s arrival. Meanwhile *Sydney* returned to the stationary skiff to find the crew still waving fuel cans around, and she remained in the area pending the arrival of a ship from Task Force 151. Given that the skiffs had already fired upon *Dubai Princess* - although no firings were witnessed by either *Sydney* or *Ballarat* - there

was a clear risk in attempting a boarding, so *Sydney* kept the vessel under observation. The skiff was in no apparent distress and as the afternoon wore on it became apparent that she had, indeed, run out of fuel.

Fortunately, *Ballarat* had been fitted with a secure, web-based communications capability which was required for her subsequent work in the United Kingdom. This system allowed relatively easy and secure communications with both CMF Headquarters and associated ships, so *Ballarat* acted as the key communication hub. This communications path allowed the Commander of Task Force 151 to direct one of his ships, USS *New Orleans*, to join *Sydney* and assume responsibility for the situation, allowing *Sydney* to continue her transit to re-join *Ballarat*. At 1715 *New Orleans* arrived on the scene and after a radio discussion a small team from *Sydney* was transferred across to *New Orleans* to provide a first-hand briefing. The team returned to *Sydney* at 1830 and the ship continued her passage along the transit corridor.

While this event proved relatively straightforward in hindsight, it does provide a very good example of the flexibility and reach of naval forces. Ships underway are always moving and can respond at very short notice to events as they unfold - they are self-contained units with a wide range of inherent skills that can be used whatever situation arises without the need for any external support or assistance. Ships deploying in support of anti-piracy operations received specific training tailored to the mission (as do all ships and units deployed for operations), however the normal 'baseline' combat capability that all RAN ships maintain provides an extremely good foundation to deal with most situations that arise at sea. Our ships were well positioned to defend both themselves and the merchant ships, but could immediately have switched to a benign posture and provided assistance if anyone onboard a vessel had become distressed. This ability to tailor - and rapidly change - posture is again a unique and very powerful attribute of sea-based forces.

Another key lesson is the value of operating with other navies on a regular basis. Of course, navies the world over have been operating in coalitions for centuries, but the relative ease with which *Sydney* and *Ballarat* could coordinate with CMF Headquarters and other coalition ships in the area was largely because the RAN routinely operates in those waters and with allies. There are RAN officers working within CMF Headquarters and foreign naval officers are on exchange with the RAN, all of which builds trust, teamwork and understanding. When a short notice situation arises, it is relatively easy to coordinate efforts and achieve a positive result for all. Of course, this is one of the key aspects of NORTHERN TRIDENT 09 - the very reason *Sydney* and *Ballarat* are deployed.

1   Department of Defence, 'Minister for defence announces Australian contribution to international anti-piracy efforts', Ministerial Press Release 095/2009, 29 May 2009.

2   United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) pertaining to RAN deployments in the Gulf until 2003 are listed in G Nash and D Stevens, *Australia's Navy in the Gulf*, Topmill, Sydney, 2006, p. 91. The multinational force's mandate was established in 2004 under UNSCR 1546 and extended under UNSCRs 1637 and 1723. For details of each resolution visit <www.un.org/Docs/sc/index.html> (1 August 2009).