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THE RAN IN THE GULF – TWO YEARS ON

On 17 March 2003 some 40 cargo dhows sailed from the Khawr Abd Allah (KAA) waterway and entered the Northern Arabian Gulf (NAG). Here awaited the pre-positioned ships of the Maritime Interception Force (MIF); a multi-national flotilla tasked with preventing both the entry of prohibited goods into Iraq and the conduct of any illegal export trade. The MIF had dealt with many similar incidents over previous months. Upwards of 300 vessels of all types were bottled up in the KAA, most of which carried high-value but illicit cargoes. In an attempt to overwhelm the waiting patrols, the latest smuggler tactic was to orchestrate a mass breakout during darkness. On this occasion, though, the dhows were leaving in the early afternoon. Many were displaying white flags and their crews even offered to dump their cargoes should this be ordered. Reacting to media reports on the imminent start of hostilities, they had decided that the possible profit no longer justified the risk. To the surprise of the smugglers, however, the MIF seemed no longer concerned with commercial contraband. After a thorough inspection to ensure they posed no threat to Coalition forces, each dhow was ordered to clear the area.

The exodus marked a watershed in nearly thirteen years of maritime interception operations. Since August 1990, when the United Nations first imposed economic sanctions following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a multi-national naval force had conducted one of the longest maritime enforcement operations in history. By itself the embargo could not force Iraq to comply with the directions of the UN Security Council but, in addition to hampering Iraq's efforts to reacquire a credible military capability, it also served as a continuing demonstration of international resolve and a highly visible deterrent to any Iraqi response. Moreover, by using surface warships the operation allowed individual nations to make a finely tuned contribution; one which could be matched exactly to their changing objectives and interests. With the move towards conflict in March 2003 the mission was about to change yet again.

The United States Navy (USN) ran the overall maritime campaign, but throughout the embargo's evolution the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) played far more than a token role. Under the codename Operation DAMASK the RAN provided a three-ship task group in September 1990 and, building on a common doctrine and many years of combined exercises, found it relatively easy to operate within an *ad hoc* coalition. RAN units later provided escort and logistic support during the combat operations to liberate Kuwait and then maintained a regular single-ship presence with the MIF in either the Arabian Gulf or the Red Sea. Over the years the manner in which the MIF conducted interceptions and boardings changed markedly, but Australian sailors proved highly

adaptable and ever ready to innovate. HMAS *Anzac*, for example, began the tenth and last DAMASK deployment in mid-2001 and was instrumental in bringing about a more aggressive approach to interception operations. Her skilled boarding parties demonstrated the advantages of a close and unremitting presence in Iraqi coastal waters. Over the course of *Anzac's* deployment the MIF's success rate against illegal traders increased from just 20% to more than 80%.¹



Handover in the Gulf, Operation CATALYST, 2005 (RAN)

Changes in the international security situation following the dramatic events of 11 September 2001 resulted in Australia increasing its contribution in the Middle East. As part of Operation SLIPPER another three-ship task group arrived in the Gulf in December 2001 and never less than two ships were maintained by regular rotation until mid-2003. With USN forces also needing to accommodate new tasks in Afghanistan, command of the MIF passed routinely to the Australian task group commander. It was a unique combined operational responsibility and the successful results did much to enhance Australia's international standing. Despite innovative tactics by the smugglers, including the use of ever more elaborate means to obstruct boardings, the MIF maintained the initiative and kept the illegal trade unprofitable. Taking place at a distance and out of sight, these activities seldom made the news, but were nonetheless essential to the military campaign which followed. By preserving a sustained presence within Iraqi territorial waters, successive RAN commanders built up not only valuable skills within the force, but also a detailed picture of local military and civil activities. Effective exploitation of this knowledge advantage was the significant feature of the RAN's contribution throughout these years.

On 18 March 2003 the RAN task group transitioned to Operation FALCONER, and the conduct of combat operations against the regime of Saddam Hussein. Also under Australian tactical command were ships from the



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USN, US Coast Guard, Royal Navy and Poland. The primary naval task in the NAG was to reopen the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr to allow the entry of humanitarian aid as quickly as possible. This task also meant supporting the British Royal Marines in their land assault and ensuring that the KAA remained clear of Iraqi forces. Each Australian ship in the force had an essential and multi-faceted part to play: the amphibious transport *Kanimbla* acted as a command platform and mother ship for coalition patrol craft and boarding parties; *Anzac* provided highly responsive naval gunfire support; while *Darwin* first acted as scene of action commander during the dhow exodus from the KAA, then offered surface and anti-air protection to high value Coalition units. The capture of three Iraqi minelaying tugs, a suicide boat and a variety of hidden weapons caches illustrated the potential threat, but their rapid discovery and neutralisation also demonstrated how completely the Coalition had established sea control. Just ten days into the campaign, the first humanitarian assistance cargo arrived at Umm Qasr, a testament to the quality of the pre-combat planning and the professionalism of the forces involved.

Despite their rapid and unquestioned success, Coalition naval operations in the Gulf were far from over. Operation CATALYST - Australia's commitment to multi-national efforts to develop a secure and stable environment in post-Saddam Iraq - began on 16 July 2003. Since then the RAN has separately deployed the frigates *Newcastle*, *Melbourne*, *Stuart*, *Adelaide* and *Darwin* to the region for periods of up to six months. Still heavily involved in interception operations, the crews of these ships have conducted hundreds of boardings, resulting in several discoveries of cash, hidden tanks of oil and other smuggled goods.

In addition to the boarding of selected vessels to ensure that contraband and weapons are not smuggled into Iraq, there is a more general requirement to keep watch on all maritime traffic entering and leaving the country, and also to provide protection for Iraq's primary oil terminals and shipping lanes. These tasks require a ship's company to remain at a high state of alert, maintaining constant visual and electronic surveillance in conditions which range from extreme heat in summer through to extreme winter cold.

On the eve of Anzac Day 2004 the ongoing threat was re-emphasised when insurgents carried out a well organised attack against the Iraqi oil terminals of Al Bakr and Khawr Al Amaya. Hundreds of fishermen use the surrounding area and Coalition forces routinely warn off dhows at risk of entering the established security zone. In closing to intercept and interrogate the latest incursion, three members of a US patrol boat's boarding party were killed when the dhow's occupants detonated an explosive charge. The on-scene maritime security operations commander, HMAS *Stuart*, immediately closed to render assistance and began to coordinate the rescue effort. Within minutes, two further attacks against the terminals were thwarted by Iraqi security detachments and it became clear that the initial incursion was part of a coordinated action. Under *Stuart's* direction Coalition forces rapidly secured the area, and Coalition plans were adjusted to counter any further threat.

In addition to the deployment of major fleet units, RAN personnel have contributed to the redevelopment of Iraq in many other ways. Clearance Diving Team 3 was instrumental in securing Iraqi port facilities during the hostilities in March 2003, and then performed a variety of ordnance disposal tasks in the surrounding region. In late 2004 the RAN members of the Iraqi Coastal Defence Training Team returned to Australia following a lengthy deployment during which they helped set up the new Iraqi Navy. Other personnel have fulfilled administrative and command roles within the wider ADF presence. Most recently, Commodore Steve Gilmore, CSC, RAN, has been appointed to command all coalition maritime operations in the northern part of the Gulf, as well as providing maritime security for Iraqi oil platforms and shipping connections in and out of Kuwait, from late April 2005.

The operational environment in the Arabian Gulf is constantly changing, and many of the operational activities that were foreign to the RAN a little over a decade ago are now common practice. Nevertheless, the Gulf remains a dangerous and unpredictable area. International boundaries are often disputed and there is an ever-present requirement for diplomacy and good judgement. Critical to the RAN's success and confidence has been the possession of effective self-protective measures, both at sea and during brief visits to select foreign ports.

The lessons arising from fifteen years of Arabian Gulf operations are many and varied. But perhaps the most important for Australian planners is the utility, flexibility and responsiveness of maritime forces, especially the surface combatant force. Although acquired essentially for the defence of Australia these ships have consistently demonstrated their ability to rapidly self-deploy and then project national power and influence many thousands of miles from home. And they have done so without requiring a significant personnel presence on foreign soil. A warship is a mobile community of highly trained specialists, one which offers exceptional versatility across a broad spectrum of operations. In the Arabian Gulf, RAN units have performed tasks ranging from peacetime surveillance, patrol and boarding operations through to high intensity combat involving air, surface, mine and asymmetric threats.

In assessing the need for transformation in the conduct of Australian security, the requirement to maintain a balance in our force structure must receive at least equal attention. We live, as we have always done, with an uncertain future. In August 1990, no one in Australia expected an operational deployment to free Kuwait. Similarly, in September 2001, few would have predicted the path which led to combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The outstanding performance of RAN warships in recent years has come not through accurate forecasts of Australia's strategic future, but because they possessed the materiel and human flexibility to constantly adapt their roles and tactics to reflect changing and unexpected circumstances and missions.

¹ Captain N.S. Coates, RAN, in *The RAN in the Gulf 1990-2005*, SPC-A, forthcoming.

